

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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Introduction

Poetry (and potentially its criticism) alone of all human talk need not be reductive. Coleridge in *The Ancient Mariner* tells a story that relates itself clearly to a major Romantic archetype, the Wanderer, the man with the mark of Cain, or the mocker of Christ, who must expiate in a perpetual cycle of guilt and suffering, and whose torment is in excess of its usually obscure object and source. This archetype figures in Blake and in Keats but is more basic to Wordsworth and Clare and Beddoes. In Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley it becomes something more, a personal myth so consuming that we hardly know whether to seek it first in the life or in the work.

The Ancient Mariner is in the tradition of the stories of Cain and of the Wandering Jew, but it does not reduce to them. It is a late manifestation of the Gothic Revival, and its first version is clearly to be related to the ballad of *The Wandering Jew* in Percy's *Reliques*, but its historical sources also tend to mislead us when we attempt to describe it in its own terms, which is the business of criticism.

The Ancient Mariner, bright-eyed and compulsive, is a haunter of wedding feasts, and in a grim way he is the chanter of a prothalamium. Yet he does not address himself to bride or groom but to a gallant who is the bridegroom's next of kin. His story means most, he implies, when it is juxtaposed with the special joy of the wedding celebration, but it is not relevant to those being joined by a sacrament. Its proper audience is an unwilling one; its function is monitory. The message can only be relayed from a lurker at the threshold to a prospective sharer of the feast.

The world of the Mariner's voyage is purely visionary; the ship is driven by a storm toward the South Pole and into a realm simpler and more drastic than the natural world of experience. Into a sea of ice, where no living thing was to be seen, through the snow fog there comes suddenly a great sea bird, the albatross. An albatross, with its wingspread of eleven feet and its length of some three and a half feet, and its white color, is a

preliminary
nuptial
song

startling phenomenon in itself, and its great power of flight can easily betoken the generosity of nature. Whatever its source, and Coleridge leaves this mysterious, the poem's albatross comes to the mariners as a free gift. They hail it in God's name as if it were human; they domesticate it with their food, which it has never eaten before; they play with it as if it were child or pet. Very directly they associate it with their luck, for now the ice splits, a south wind springs up, and they start the journey northward back to the ordinary world. The poem's first great event is suddenly placed before us; without apparent premeditation or conscious motive, the narrator murders the albatross.

The murder is a gratuitous act, but then so is the initial appearance of the bird. (There is a tradition of seemingly motiveless malevolence that goes from Shakespeare's Iago (whom Coleridge saw as a tragic poet, manipulating men rather than words) and Milton's Satan to the protagonists of Poe, Melville, and Dostoevsky, and that appears in Gide, Camus, and other recent writers.) The tradition begins with the demonic (tinged with Prometheanism), moves (in the later nineteenth century) into a vitalism crossed by the social image of man in revolt, and climaxes (in our own time) in a violence that yet confirms individual existence and so averts an absolute despair of self. Coleridge's mariner belongs to this tradition whose dark ancestors include Cain, the Wandering Jew, and the Judas whose act of betrayal is portrayed as a desperate assertion of freedom by Wilde, Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence.

(This tradition's common denominator is that of a desperate assertion of self and a craving for a heightened sense of identity.) This is what the Mariner brings about for himself, in a death-in-life purgatorial fashion; for his companions he brings only a terrible death and a mechanical life-in-death following his own partial redemption.

Several influential modern readings of *The Ancient Mariner* have attempted to baptize the poem by importing into it the notion of Original Sin and the myth of the Fall. But the Mariner is neither disobedient in his dire action nor altered in nature by its first effects. There is nothing in him to suggest the depravity of the natural heart, nor is the slaying of an albatross at all an adequate symbol of a lapse that demands expression in the language of theology. Coleridge in his *Table Talk* (May 31, 1830) felt the poem was already too overtly moral (thinking of the pious conclusion) and said of it:

It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights' tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up,

and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie's son.

The Ancient Mariner seems to have just this peculiar moral logic; you shoot an albatross quite casually, as you might throw aside a date shell. The tradition of the gratuitous crime also characterizes itself by its emphasis on the casual as opposed to the causal. Lafcadio in *Les Caves du Vatican*, just before performing his crime without a motive, says, "It's not so much about events that I'm curious, as about myself." Lafcadio and the Mariner are not (in advance) concerned about what ensues from an act; the act for each becomes a bracketed phenomenon, pure act, detached from motivation or consequences, and existent in itself. But the Mariner learns not to bracket, and the poem would have us learn, not where to throw our date shells, nor to love all creatures great and small, but to connect all phenomena, acts and things, in the fluid dissolve of the imagination:

O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul

Frequently noted by critics is the extraordinary passivity of the Mariner. Wordsworth first said that the Mariner "does not act, but is continually acted upon." Not only does the Mariner rarely act (he shoots once, drinks his own blood once, so as to cry out that he has seen a sail, and blesses once), but usually he expresses no reaction to events. Most of the strong emotional and moral statements in the poem are in Coleridge's frequently beautiful marginal prose. The Mariner is merely an accurate observer, not a man of any sensibility. Despite the wonder and terror of what befalls him, he does not reach a height of emotional expression until part 4 of the poem, and then is driven to it, fittingly, by *solitude*. Alone with the dead men, and surrounded by the slime of subhuman life, he awakens first into agony of soul, then into a sense of contrast between the human and what is "beneath" it in the scale of being, and finally into a startled awareness of unexpected beauty. The crisis comes with moonrise on the seventh night of his lonely ordeal. The marginal prose meets the crisis with a beauty of expression which seems to touch at the limits of art:

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.

He can be saved only by translating this yearning from the moon and stars to what envelops his own loneliness and fixedness, by naturalizing himself in his surroundings and finding a joy that will intimate the one life he shares with the creatures of the great deep. The finest stanzas in the poem trace his transference of love from the moon and stars to "God's creatures of the great calm":

The moving Moon went up the sky,
And no where did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside—

Her beams bemoaned the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ship's huge shadow lay,
The charmed water burnt alway
A still and awful red.

Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watched the water-snakes:
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.

The moon's beams *bemoan* the ocean, because upon that rotting and still torrid surface (the moon is just rising and the heat of the tropical sun yet abides) an appearance of "April hoar-frost" is now spread. The light given by the water snakes is called elfish and is said to fall off "in hoary flakes." Moonlight and hoarfrost are an imaginative unity at the close of "Frost at Midnight"; they give and take light, to and from one another, and the light, like the fair luminous mist in "Dejection," is emblematic both of creative joy and of the One Life of the phenomenal universe.

The Mariner now sees the beauty and happiness of what he had characterized, not inaccurately, as slime:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;
 And from my neck so free
 The Albatross fell off, and sank
 Like lead into the sea.

His consciousness remains passive; he blesses them "unaware." As a sacramental moment this is unique, even in Romantic poetry. A less than ordinary man, never before alive to the sacramental vision of Nature as life, joy, love, suddenly declares the most elemental forms of life in Nature to be joyous and deserving of his affection. The slimy sea serpents are nearly as formless as the chaos Coleridge is to dread in his late poems of "Positive Negation," "Limbo," and "Ne Plus Ultra." Yet these creatures have color and beauty, they are alive, and "everything that lives is holy," as Blake insisted. At this, its climactic point, *The Ancient Mariner* is the most vital and imaginative achievement of Coleridge's poetry. Here, for once, he places complete trust in his Imagination, and it cannot fail him.

The Ancient Mariner is not, like "Kubla Khan," a poem about poetry. The shaping spirit, or Secondary Imagination, is not its theme, though recently critics have tried for such a reading. The Mariner's failure, and his subsequent salvation, is one of the Primary Imagination, "the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." God looked upon His Creation and saw that it was good. The Mariner has now first learned to repeat in his very finite mind this eternal act of perception and creation. This awakening certainly does not bring the whole soul of this man into activity; the Mariner does not learn to order his experience so as first to balance and then be free of it. He falls victim to it, and its eternal verbal repetition becomes his obsession. Had the Mariner been a poet, he could have written the Rime he incarnates. He has seen the truth, but the truth does not set him free. He returns to life ~~as~~ a mere fundamentalist of the Primary Imagination, endlessly repeating the story of his own salvation and the one moral in it that he can understand:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
 All things both great and small;
 For the dear God who loveth us,
 He made and loveth all.

The other moral is less simple but quite as elemental. Coleridge has written the poem as an alternative reaction to the Mariner's experience, for that experience of purgation through love of the One Life is his own. The higher Imagination shapes truth; the lower merely takes it, through Nature,

from the Shaping Spirit of God. The poem celebrates the continued power of creative joy in its creator. But the poem also foreshadows the eventual fate of its creator, when the activity of the whole soul will yield to torpor. Coleridge as theologian and philosopher found more willing auditors than the Mariner did, but his quest came to duplicate that of his creation.