No Moral Miracle: A Reading of *The Ancient Mariner*

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Questions about the nature of evil and retribution and speculation about the figure of the cursed or damned man were much in Wordsworth's and Coleridge's minds up to the writing of *The Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge's many unrealized schemes had included a poem on Evil,[1] and at about the time of the *Mariner* he made a note of the topic of the Wandering Jew,[2] a character then in vogue. Wordsworth had recently completed *The Borderers* and written an introductory essay on crime, moral scepticism and superstition; some of the imagery of the play seems to have left its mark on the *Mariner*, and at the opening there is a remark about "some dark deed to which in early life His passion drove him—then a Voyager Upon the midland sea."[3] Other examples could be given of their sustained interest in such issues. Against that background their own recollections of the beginnings of the poem, together with their own and others' early responses to it, become of interest. Familiar as some of these materials are to the biographer, they suggest issues which criticism should have before it.

Coleridge conceived of a kind of prose poem in three cantos, *The Wanderings of Cain*, optimistically proposing that it should be completed by Wordsworth and himself in a night's writing. Only Coleridge's canto was done and the scheme "broke up in a laugh: and the Ancient Mariner was written instead".[4] In November 1797 the two began to work out the poem. Coleridge had heard of his friend John Cruikshank's odd dream of a skeleton ship with figures in it, which echoed a number of seafaring tales of ghost ships. Wordsworth supplied the idea of the killing of the

1 "you were talking of the *Origin of Evil* as a most prolific subject for a Long Poem—why not adopt it, Coleridge? there would be *room* for imagination." *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr. (Ithaca and London 1975), I, 97.

2 *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York 1957–), I, no. 45.

3 *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford 1904 (1959)), p. 29; I, 15–17.

4 *Poems of Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (Oxford 1912), p. 287 (Prefatory Note to *Wanderings of Cain*, written in 1828; Coleridge mentions 1798 in error for 1797).

Albatross from his reading of Shelvocke's *Voyage* and added the notion of vengeance for that act, the navigation of the ship by the dead, and a few particular lines. (In Shelvocke, though, the bird is shot, by a melancholy Captain Hatley, as an ill omen.) But their "respective manners proved so widely different" that Wordsworth withdrew from "an undertaking upon which I could only have been a clog."[5] One suspects, without much evidence, that he was already uneasy about the direction in which Coleridge was moving. By the time the poem was finished in the following March they had decided on *Lyrical Ballads*; the first version of the *Mariner* had pride of place at the beginning of the 1798 volume. The last poem was *Tintern Abbey*. The two pieces demonstrate very clearly their wide differences.

According to Coleridge, both poets had held an image of a poetry of truth to nature which was like a "known and familiar landscape" seen in a new light and shading, "moon-light or sunset". But in Coleridge's intended contributions "the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real." With this in mind he wrote the *Mariner*, and was preparing other poems in which "I should have more nearly realised my ideal"; he still had reservations about the poem's "human interest and semblance of truth", and the relationship between the real and the supernatural.[6]

Among the early reviewers, Southey objected to the heavily loaded diction of the 1798 version; and while he found a laboured beauty in many stanzas, "in connection they are absurd or unintelligible." He invited readers to "exercise their ingenuity in attempting to unriddle what follows. . . . It is a Dutch attempt at German sublimity. Genius has been employed in producing a poem of little merit."[7] Coleridge considerably revised the poem

5 Wordsworth's "Isabella Fenwick" note of 1842 and his information to the Rev. Alexander Dyce, conveniently given in *Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth and Coleridge*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (University Paperbacks, London 1963 (1971)), pp. 274–5. See J. L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Sentry edn, Boston 1955), p. 206, for Hatley.

6 *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford 1907), II, 5–6.

7 *Critical Review*, XXIV (October 1798), 197–204. The relevant part of the review is in Brett and Jones, pp. 319–20. Southey quotes ll. 301–2 (1798), "etc., etc." "A Dutch attempt . . ." is usually taken as a cheap jibe. But it may imply that the Falkenberg oral legend from the

for *Lyrical Ballads* 1800. He removed much of the pseudo-archaic diction ("the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on", Wordsworth complained) which he had probably put there in the first place to give the "ballad" flavour he supposed to be required. He also dropped about forty lines, most importantly what has come to be known as the "Hands of Glory" passage, and added some others and the sub-title "A Poet's Reverie". The sharpest criticism then came from Wordsworth himself. In a quite extraordinary note, printed only in 1800, he congratulated himself on having rescued the poem but, along with some faint praise, remarked on "great defects." The Mariner had no "distinct character", either as Mariner or as human being; he did not act, but was acted upon; the events had no necessary connection; the imagery was too laboriously accumulated.[8] (The comments carry unfortunate echoes from Southey.) Wordsworth's note drew Lamb to defend the "human Tale"; despite "all the miraculous part of it", the Mariner's feelings possessed him; he "undergoes such *Trials*, as overwhelm and bury all individuality or memory of what he was.—Like the state of a man in a *Bad dream*, one terrible peculiarity of which is, that all consciousness of personality is *gone*."[9]

Coleridge made further revisions. For his *Sybilline Leaves*, 1817, he left out some highly-coloured ghastliness from the description of Death[10] and added the much-debated glosses and the epigraph from Burnet, both of which appear to have been in his mind for the poem for some years.[11] The glosses remain something of an embarrassment in their leaning to orthodoxies and certainly should not be allowed to dictate one's reading of the poem. In the passage from Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae* he omitted several lines without any indication, including a remark about hierarchies of Angels (he did not want the spirits of the poem to be graded); and he inserted, of the powers of the

8 *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years*, rev. edn Chester L. Shaver (Oxford 1967), p. 264. Brett and Jones, pp. 273, 276–7.

9 Marr, p. 266.

10 *Poems*, p. 193; between ll. 184–90.

11 The glosses may have begun to be drafted after 1800. The passage from Burnet was copied out in 1801–2, with the omissions and the insertion. *Notebooks*, I, no. 1000H; and I Pt 2 for comment.

Netherlands, of one who for murder was doomed to wander for ever on the sea with two spectres dicing for his soul, was quite widely known. See Lowes, pp. 253, 513, for the legend.

universe, his own questions as if they were Burnet's ("Quid agunt? quae loca habitant?": "What do they do? where do they live?"). A few more changes were made for the 1834 edition, the text in which most readers now have the poem. What Coleridge did not omit or alter at any stage, though, are the much-discussed "moral stanzas" at the end of the poem, although he must have been aware of their apparent inadequacy.

Over the years, then, Coleridge seems to have had the poem repeatedly before his mind; the Notebooks bear this out. As he agonized about his own life he was tempted to identify himself with the "Old Navigator" (a temptation into which some readers have followed him). Even the epitaph he composed for himself jokes grimly on the figure by whom the Mariner was won.[12]

Behind the poem of 1834 lies the failure of collaboration and the sting of early criticism, as well as that richness of reading and association which has been pursued by Lowes and others. The mass of criticism which has followed, attempting to meet Southey's challenge to ingenuity, has included the opium fancy, simple Christian optimism, heavy jokes about the prevention of cruelty to albatrosses,[13] both more and less sympathetic explorations of Coleridge's identification of himself with the progress of the poem, interesting Jungian readings, and forays to the wilder shores of Freudianism. An example of this last may be mentioned in passing. The unfortunate bird is offered up as symbol for both Coleridge's wife and mother, and the Mariner's suffering as 'pre-genital punishment for a preoedipal crime'. In this account the "silly buckets on the deck" that he dreams fill with dew (ll. 297–9) symbolize "the mother's breasts, previously empty and cruel, now full and forgiving." No matter that the Albatross is male (l. 405); "the mother was a masculine, rejecting female."[14] (Perhaps the moral is that mothers or wives of either sex with breasts like buckets deserve shooting.)

12 O, lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C.;
That he who many a year with toil of breath
Found death in life, may here find life in death!
"Epitaph", ll. 4–6; *Poems*, pp. 491–2.

13 Empson reminds us that Coleridge opposed Erskine's Bill for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals as "an example of the dangerous principle of extending PERSONALITY to things". *Coleridge's Verse: A Selection*, ed. William Empson and David Pirie (London 1972), p. 42 (quoting from J. Colmer, *Coleridge, Critic of Society* (London 1959)).

14 David Beres, "A Dream, A Vision, and a Poem", *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, XXXII, ii (1951), 97–116. Conveniently quoted and discussed in *The Annotated Ancient Mariner*, ed. Martin Gardner (Cleveland and New York 1965), pp. 215–17.

Most serious discussions, however, have seen the poem as allegorizing or symbolizing great crime and great punishment, redemptive grace, and penance leading to deep moral or religious awareness. Robert Penn Warren, for whom the shooting of the bird is a re-enactment of the Fall, "appropriately without motive", in an influential essay coupled this structure with a rigorous symbolism of the Coleridgean imagination.[15] (In what sense was the Fall motiveless?) In many of these readings, one feels, the strategies of the poem itself, its turns of chance and fate, its ironies of anticipation and recollection, and its dramatic structure, have been reduced in the desire for a recognizable moral or religious (or aesthetic) conclusion. Coleridge's rejoinder to the devout Mrs Barbauld, who thought the poem improbable and without a moral, is worth invoking again. He told "Mistress Bare and Bald"[16] that while the probability "might admit some question," the chief fault was "the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the world in a work of such pure imagination." There should be no more moral than in the *Arabian Nights* tale of the date-eating merchant who is told by a genie "he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant because one of the date-shells had, it seemed, put out the eye of the genie's son." Coleridge was stressing the motiveless, casual nature of the shooting, and warning against taking the "moral stanzas" at face value.[17] In one sense though, with which Coleridge might have agreed, Mrs Barbauld was right about the "moral".

Among the stories of the undying Coleridge knew in 1797[18] was that of Lewis's *The Monk*, which he had reviewed in Feb-

15 Warren's influential essay, "A Poem of Pure Imagination", first published 1946, has been reprinted in whole or part a number of times. The version in *Selected Essays* (New York 1958) includes interesting comment on the critical debate which followed first publication. See *The Ancient Mariner: A Handbook*, ed. R. A. Gettmann (San Francisco 1961), pp. 114–33.

16 *Notebooks*, III, no. 3965 (July 1810).

17 The Mrs Barbauld episode, often quoted, is in *Table Talk*, H. N. Coleridge's recollections of Coleridge's conversation, under 31 May 1830, although the exchange was probably much earlier. Humphry House, *Coleridge: The Clark Lectures* (London 1953), pp. 90–91, discusses the mysteriously happy conclusion of the tale in the *Arabian Nights*, in an effort to show Coleridge intended to demonstrate that the arbitrary character of fate may be overcome; but it is not at all clear that Coleridge had the conclusion in mind. House accuses those who would object of "grotesque . . . wilful blindness"; but his own view seems to share in the wilful seeing of what is not in the poem.

18 See Lowes, Ch. XIV.

ruary. Part of the review is interesting for its objections to the use of the "horrible and preternatural" simply to excite the unawakened or exhausted appetite. He went on, "Let [the romance writer] work *physical* wonders only, and we will be content to dream with him for a while; but the first *moral* miracle which he attempts, he disgusts and awakens us."[19] No "moral miracle", then, or horror for the sake of stimulation only. Rather, "a human interest and a semblance of truth" from the supernatural world which is "part at least", although not the whole, of the Mariner's voyage.

The Ancient Mariner is a tale within a tale, a complex dramatic narrative held firmly within a simple story. A young man is on his way to a wedding feast, the known and familiar landscape of the celebration before God of the union of man in society. He is accosted abruptly and apparently arbitrarily by an old seaman. (The Mariner's choice of victim is explained, though, in the context of the whole poem; his final "That moment that his face I see, I know the man that must hear me" goes back to "And I am next of kin"—ll. 588–9, 6.) The seaman forces on him an obsessively rehearsed account of a voyage which departed from that landscape and returned to harbour there in a manner which forever clouds its sunny innocence. The Wedding Guest's initial human and offhand disregard for the encounter, his wish to be free ("Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon", l. 12); his growing involvement, marked by pity and terror ("God save thee . . ."; "I fear thee . . .", ll. 79, 224); his failure to escape, until no escape is possible, from the Mariner's need to teach for nobody's benefit but his own ("The Mariner hath his will"; "To him my tale I teach", ll. 16, 590); his reduction to a more primitive condition, and his awakening to experience (he "listens like a three years' child"; "A sadder and a wiser man, He rose the morrow morn", ll. 15, 624–5); his final loss of joy and companionship ("the Wedding-Guest Turned from the bridegroom's door", ll. 520–21); all these stages in his story reflect in the familiar landscape the cruces of the tale within. At the end the two stories, the landscape of reality and the seascape of imagination, meet and come together again "Below the kirk, below the hill, Below the lighthouse top" (ll. 23–4, 465–7).

By the end of the Mariner's story we understand how all individuality, consciousness of personality, all that does not exist

19 *Critical Review*, XIX (February 1797), pp. 194–200. See Gettmann, p. 44.

through the tale itself, has been burned away. As he begins, he is characterized only by his "long grey beard and glittering eye" (l. 3),[20] the traditional appearance of the seer (whatever his vision may come to). But the "human interest" is always present. Although the Wedding Guest, in his simpler existence, is most obviously present at the beginning and end of the poem, we are strategically reminded of him, directly or indirectly, throughout. Coleridge was careful about the placing of the direct reminders, leaving his name out of Parts II and III but introducing both his fear and the Mariner's ambiguous reassurances at the beginning of Part IV and in the middle of Part V. (With considerable tact he omitted from Part V after 1798 ten lines of too obvious direct address which anticipate the poem's last lines.)[21] The indirect reminders will be mentioned below. It is with the Wedding Guest, the effect on him of the Mariner's unburdening, that the similarly uncomprehending and possessed reader is invited to identify.

It is not at first clear to the Wedding Guest (if indeed it is ever quite clear) whether the Mariner's story is of entering a world of supernatural reality which has the historic solidity of the world of the early voyagers, or is of suffering in a projected world of nightmare which has overlaid reality. In either case, the transition is deft. The repeated "merry/merrily", the juxtaposition of the sounds of the feasting and the traditional cheering of the ship (by Hermit and Pilot, the end of the poem implies) indicate that it is from such a church (perhaps the same) as that of the wedding company, with its familiar symbol of safety for the sailor, and its spiritual security, that the voyage departs:

> May'st hear the merry din.
>
> The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
> Merrily did we drop
> Beneath the kirk, beneath the hill,
> Beneath the lighthouse top.
>
> The merry minstrelsy.
>
> (ll. 8, 21–4, 36)

All through the poem such links, both parallels and contrasts,

20 Cp. the "flashing eyes and floating hair" of the hopeful dome restorer of "Kubla Khan". In 1798 the *Mariner* included, between ll. 372–3 (*Poems*, p. 201), "For that, which comes out of thine eye, doth make My body and soul to be still." Coleridge was greatly interested in Mesmerism and "animal magnetism".

21 *Poems*, p. 201, between ll. 372–3.

between the two stories are insinuated.

As soon as the southward leg of the voyage is under way and the Equator crossed, before the appearance of the Albatross, there are images of motiveless pursuit by Nature. The storm is personified as "tyrannous and strong". It "struck" and "chased" until the ship, like one "who pursued with yell and blow Still treads the shadow of his foe, and forward bends his head" (ll. 42–8), cannot be free (any more than can the Wedding Guest). As they are blown by the north wind beyond the Trades, the crew are powerless to control the ship. In the 1798 text there are the lines "For days and weeks it played us freaks—Like chaff we drove along" (ll. 43–4 var.), as if the crew already are treated by Nature like what they are to become, lifeless husks. The pursuit is to the green isolation of the Antarctic, howling and groaning threats of destruction. When the Albatross does then appear it is hailed, either rightly (as the superstition has it) or wrongly (as Captain Hatley would have thought), "in God's name" (l. 66) as an omen of relief. It is linked with the "good south wind" which allows control of the vessel; "The helmsman steered us through" (ll. 70–1). But with a foreboding as immediate as the act and its consequences, the telling of which it anticipates, the Wedding Guest cries out to God against "the fiends that plague thee thus" (ll. 79–80), so echoing the sailors' cry for safety with a cry for the Mariner's salvation. The exclamation is as abrupt as the Mariner's interruption was. The Wedding Guest has responded to a countenance which must have been like Cain's in the uncompleted work, which "told in a strange and terrible language of agonies that had been, and were, and were still to continue to be" (*Poems*, p. 289, ll. 68–9).

Attempts to explain, to rationalize, the shooting of the great bird, and so to accommodate the first of the Mariner's three main actions within large but tidy dimensions, often avoid the dramatic point that the ballad form serves; no explanation is offered or required. The incident simply happened. It is given as involuntary, motiveless; trivial and wanton, perhaps; even, though with dramatic hindsight, irresponsible; but no more precise moral or religious epithet seems possible. Coleridge's later Notebook entry, made while he was on board ship to Malta and after watching the sailors idly shooting at a hawk during a calm, carries the right sense. "O strange Lust of Murder in Man! It is not cruelty; it is mere non-feeling from non-thinking."[22] As Wordsworth's evil

22 *Notebooks*, II, no. 2090 (1804).

Rivers/Oswald had put it, in a passage in the "absolutely wonderful" play which must have caught Coleridge's eye, "Action is transitory—a step, a blow, The motion of a muscle—this way or that—'Tis done . . .". What the poem forces on us is that we may be responsible for the consequences of action, for the self and for others, whether or not the action is determined or its consequences foreseen, let alone comprehended.

The outcome for the Mariner, of endless "plaguing", is caught by the continuing lines from *The Borderers*: ". . . 'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed: Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark, And shares the nature of infinity."[23] The outcome for the crew, the Mariner's family and society as the "goodly company" is the Wedding Guest's, is the lesser suffering of eventual release into death. They are involved by seeking to explain, to rationalize, in a situation in which a causal calculus is irrelevant; and in any case they waver and are mistaken. First they condemn, primly and selfishly ("I had done a hellish thing, And it would work 'em woe", ll. 91–2). Then, when nothing seems to change except that the sun rises, they praise, and over-confidently generalize, in the same manner (" 'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay . . .", l. 101). But the sun's rising between the two judgments mocks by its ambiguity. "Nor dim nor red, like God's own head" (l. 97) can be read in two ways.[24] If it is a sign of God, as the Albatross was taken to be, it is not the sign of an unambiguously merciful God. And as if further to mock their judgments, the wind does now drop entirely, blowing neither way, and the sun is mean and oppressive. Movement, the known causal relationship of wind and sail ("nor breath nor motion"), is replaced by the monotony of repetition, a purposelessness which echoes that of the killing, a trivialization of life. Coleridge probably had in mind, in the famous image, not some minor marine painting but the crudely decorated wood and stucco models of sailing ships which were popular ornaments:

> Day after day, day after day,
> We stuck, no breath nor motion;
> As idle as a painted ship
> Upon a painted ocean.
> (ll. 115–18)

This accidie, not as often of the spirit but of life and the whole

23 *Poetical Works*, p. 51; III, 1, 539–41, and 1, 541–44.

24 Coleridge must have been aware of the ambiguity and chosen deliberately to retain it; for neither of the alterations he made to the line, after 1798 and again after 1800, affects it.

society, is emphasized by the often parodied lines which follow, one of the poem's grim jokes, about sea-water and thirst. Yet the only moving life exists in that apparently rotting sea, the slimy creatures which "crawl with legs upon the slimy sea" (ll. 125–6). These creatures are horrible because, as Empson has remarked, they seem an outrage against Nature; they have legs.[25] The grotesque detail is a reminder of land; yet their tracks ("The water, like a witch's oils, Burnt green, and blue and white," ll. 129–30) reinforce the "painted ship" image. The tracks are imitated by the "death-fires" which dance around the ship, the *corpo santo* or St Elmo's fire often reported about the rigging of ships in tropical waters but also associated with graveyards and burying-grounds.[26] The vessel is already taking on the characteristics of the spectre-ship about to appear, which in a manner it is to become.

The sailors' last attempt in this Part is to postulate a vengeful spirit and then attempt to transfer responsibility for its presence to the Mariner; "Instead of the cross, the Albatross About my neck was hung" (ll. 141–2).[27] Critics have recognized the obvious symbolism here but applied it to the poem as a whole rather than to the crew's clinging to the familiar; but in the poem, it does not seem that the bloody sun/God was impressed. In Part III the arbitrariness, rather than appropriateness, of both nature and man's condition, which has been woven into the narrative so far, finds a far more powerful symbol.

Delirium and nightmare, at one level of reading, and the supernatural, at a further level, now more openly overlay reality. The crew's eyes are glazed with thirst and dulled understanding, unlike those of the Mariner, still the individual, which have been bright from the beginning. He is the first to see the spectre-ship approach from the west, moving as the becalmed ship as yet cannot, "without a breeze, without a tide" (l. 169). At first he thinks of it as the crew had thought of the Albatross ("hither to work us weal", l. 168), although it is lit by the last fires of the bloody sun which silhouette its parted planks, to make it appear like a dungeon of hell, and light its "sails like gossameres" (ll. 177–84). In this hope he makes the second of his three actions.

25 Empson, p. 40. See also Lowes, pp. 81–2, on legged sea-creatures.

26 See Lowes, pp. 78–81.

27 The line has aroused some rather ludicrous debate about whether Coleridge had in mind the great white albatross, which has a wing span of over ten feet, or the smaller black albatross of Shelvocke's *Voyage*.

The first apparently had led him into this world; the second is the attempt to articulate what seems to offer escape from it: "I bit my arm, I sucked the blood, And cried, A sail! A sail!" (ll. 159–60). Immediately the strange ship approaches directly. The action has been seen as one of heroic energy, and incidentally answering the second of Wordsworth's charges; "When Wordsworth complained that the Mariner never acts, Coleridge ought to have told him to try doing this trick himself."[28] But, as the Wedding Guest must have realized, here heroism does not find its reward. The crew may grin for joy and feel as if "they were drinking all", and, turning their coats again, be agape with admiration for the act (ll. 162–6); they and the Mariner are again mistaken.

The spectre-ship's crew are only now seen for what they are, the fiendish messengers of the Mariner's and the crew's fates. Coleridge's revisions at this point are interesting. He dropped, no doubt very regretfully, a tempting but distracting pun ("That woman and her fleshless Pheere [mate/fear]") as well as the details about Death's appearance. In a marginal manuscript addition to a copy of 1798 he considered inserting a passage which includes "The woman and a fleshless man Therein sat merrily" (var. to ll. 184–9). "Merrily" would have echoed back to the poem's opening, and "fleshless", as well as its obvious suggestion of the grave, would have provided ironic comparison with the chaste sexuality of the wedding. Probably Coleridge decided that the poem did not need such heavy underlining of the comparison. unavoidable to the Wedding Guest, between bride and groom and these diseased and skeletal figures. (He would have noticed too that now the Mariner is unwilling guest at another coupling.)

The comparison is in any case pointed up by the repeatedly italicized pronoun "her", carried over from its application in the preceding stanza to the spectre-ship. The bride was "red as a rose" (l. 34).

> *Her* lips were red, *her* looks were free,
> Her locks were yellow as gold:
> Her skin was as white as leprosy,
> The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
> Who thicks man's blood with cold.
> (ll. 190–4)[29]

Life-in-Death is "free" in the sense a whore is free; she will take

28 Empson, p. 38.

29 I am struck by the resemblance here to Graves's lines about the "White Goddess". In his account she is mother, lover, and murderess of the poet.

any man, compared with the chaste bride. Her skin has the fearful whiteness of plague (the word used by the Wedding Guest at the end of Part I).

The pair are playing dice, the symbol of chance or arbitrariness. As the game is completed and the tropical night falls their ship shoots off, with the suggestion that the leprous captain has power over the sun. Her three whistles, the nautical signal for "I am going astern", and the suddenness of the manoeuvre, mock the ordinary world of wind and sail. The fear that overcomes the Mariner parallels the fear of the Wedding Guest ("the fiends that plague thee thus"). As that had anticipated the shooting ("off shot" reminds us of it), this similarly anticipates the result of the cast of the dice. The sudden image, "Fear at my heart, as at a cup, My life-blood seemed to sip" (ll. 204–5) has an extraordinary, vampiristic physicality. It ridicules the Mariner's "heroic" act of blood-letting, implies what he is to be ("as thin as air", ll. 372–3 var., was one way of putting it), and brushes aside redemptive readings of the poem by its startling parody of the Communion. Only after this does it become clear that the Mariner has been first prize, and hence that life-in-death is more to be feared than death.

The sense of arbitrariness is then strengthened by the reappearance of the mist and the moon which had attended the Albatross. Often in Romantic poetry these are symbols of creativity and peace, and they have been taken in this way in *The Ancient Mariner*. It should be emphasized that they mark both the shooting and the death of 200 men; moon and sun cannot be turned into symbolic opposites, as in Warren's essay. The crew again turn their coats, and silently curse the Mariner as they thump down (at last they have succeeded in breaking the silence). Their souls, as they depart to the traditional judgment, parody his act (although they are not released from that process of judgment until the ship finally reaches harbour):

> One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,
> Too quick for groan or sigh,
> Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,
> And cursed me with his eye.
>
> Four times fifty living men,
> (And I heard nor sigh nor groan)
> With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,
> They dropped down one by one.
>
> The souls did from their bodies fly,—
> They fled to bliss or woe!

And every soul, it passed me by,
Like the whizz of my cross-bow!
(ll. 212–23)

At the opening of Part IV the Mariner's isolation is at first like that of the "painted ship" before the visitation. Sea and ship still rot, although the dead do not, and there is no saint to displace the effect of the fiends. There is still choked silence; another voice dries up the traditional spring or fountain of the heart's prayer—

or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust.
(ll. 245–7)

The "wicked whisper" may be simply, "God is unjust", as Empson suggests;[30] there is as strong a case for this as for, say, "Now throttle a water-snake". The phrase may recall, distantly and paradoxically, God's still small voice promising rescue, heard by Elijah in the wilderness (*I Kings*, 19). Immediately, though, it echoes verbally with the "far-heard whisper" of the death-ship's departure, and so is a reminder of the possession of the Mariner. "Dust", implying the decay of the grave, reinforces this; Gray's "silent dust" in the *Elegy* (l. 43) is a relevant comparison. But here, the heart as dry as dust is a part of the Mariner's mode of existence.

In this Part, indeed, the Mariner's experiences begin to be internalized, to become all his character, to beat in his mind however he tries to shut out the evidence around. Although "I closed my lids, and kept them close," yet "the balls like pulses beat"; and the whole sea-experience "Lay like a load on my weary eye, And the dead were at my feet" (ll. 247–52). As he longs for death, with the eyes of the dead staring upon him, his new mode of existence is coming into being in a parody of the Creation: "Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse, And yet I could not die" (ll. 261–2). His eyes move to the rising moon and to the stars seemingly following it (it is still the "star-dogged Moon")[31] and he "yearneth towards" them, as the much admired gloss has it: "everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their ap-

30 Empson, p. 39.

31 J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London 1959), p. 160, distinguishes the moon dogged by a star *within* its crescent, representing daemonic vengeance, and the moon "with a star or two beside" as a symbol of reconciliation; this seems to me a sophistication following from the usual reading of the gloss, and unconvincing.

pointed 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" (gloss to ll. 263–6). Many critics have taken this to indicate at least a first stage in the easing of the Mariner's suffering; for Warren, it is "Life, order, universal communion and process, joy" which are being foreshadowed to follow the redemptive blessing of the sea-creatures.[32] Such readings are beguiled by the deliberate beauty given to the unattainable in the gloss and in the lines to which it belongs. As before, moon and mist are mocking—as the following stanza makes clear: "Her beams bemocked the sultry main, Like April hoar-frost spread" (ll. 267–8). The gloss becomes ironically anticipatory; the Mariner's return is not restful, he is to have no native country or home, his arrival is unexpected but announced eerily, his reception is neither joyful nor silent.

From moon and stars he looks to the water-snakes, coiling in and out of the now mysteriously red shadow of the ship and by turns luminously white in the moonlight and, within the shadow, rich with the colours of the water beneath the death-fires of Part II. The snakes too are deceptive (as literary snakes often are). The Mariner's involuntary blessing of them contrasts with his earlier attempt at prayer, stifled by the "wicked whisper". Briefly, possession seems to have been relinquished:

> O happy living things! no tongue
> Their beauty might declare:
> A spring of love gushed from my heart,
> And I blessed them unaware . . .
>
> The self-same moment I could pray . . .
> (ll. 282–5, 288)

There appears to be grace and forgiveness at last through the recognition of living beauty in Nature. "This act of blessing does not *win* God's grace, it *is* God's grace", is a not untypical view.[33] There is obvious support in the immediate falling off of the Albatross, "Like lead into the sea" (l. 291), at the end of the Part. But such interpretations do not give the whole truth about what is happening; if they did, one could expect the happy homecoming of the gloss, the relief of the Wedding Guest (who, like the reader, may be deceived for the moment into a suspension of disbelief). But the unrotting dead are still there. The "blessing" passage is preparing for a further condition of horror and arbitrariness.

32 See Gettmann, p. 122.
33 R. L. Brett, *Reason and Imagination* (London 1960), p. 101.

Soon the ability to pray is withdrawn again.

Part V and VI, the voyage home, contain the "miraculous part" which Lamb distrusted. There is something of the laboriousness of which Wordsworth more generally complained, and the detailed revisions, made partly to satisfy the first critics, as I have suggested may have obscured part of the intended structure (although even as the lines stand, they are at points heavy with irony).

At the beginning of Part V the rain comes and the Mariner sleeps, waking with the hope that he has escaped Life-in-Death and been released into the condition of the crew: ". . . almost I thought that I had died in sleep, And was a blessed ghost" (ll. 307–8). But the ship is moved homeward by that wind which does not touch the sails, now so rotted ("so thin and sere", l. 312) as to be like those of the spectre-ship. The death-fires return. Lightning falls like a river, rain like a waterfall, and the dead rise to their accustomed roles in a parody of the Resurrection. In one detail there is terrible recollection of the society which has been destroyed (and for the Wedding Guest, of whose continuing fear we are reminded, recollection of the celebration of the family which is proceeding):

> They raised their limbs like ghastly tools—
> We were a ghastly crew.
>
> The body of my brother's son
> Stood by me, knee to knee.
> The body and I pulled at one rope,
> But he said nought to me.
>
> (ll. 339–44)

(This is what Coleridge made of one of Wordsworth's suggestions.) Then there is momentary relief again. The "blessed spirits" (the Mariner thought he had become one, but he had not) who move the bodies like automata interrupt their navigation. At dawn they cluster round the mast and sing sweetly, like skylarks, flutes, and angels, to offer a vision of tranquillity in the nearing familiar landscape. Even the rotten sails can respond in kind, because of their rottenness:

> the sails made on
> A pleasant noise till noon,
> A noise like of a hidden brook
> In the leafy month of June,
> That to the sleeping woods all night
> Singeth a quiet tune.
>
> (ll. 367–72)

The vision is falsely consoling, as both what follows and the Her-

mit's later lines about nature, for which these lines are preparing, show. In the 1798 version there were at this point (between 372–3) lines which made the falseness rather more obvious. The dead crew again work the ship, and the Wedding Guest is told the final effect of the tale upon him, in later versions reserved for the last lines, and warned that "never a sadder tale" was to be heard.

The ship now moves without any breeze, as the spectre-ship did. At noon it once more reaches the Equator, the limit of the supernatural world, and the sun is again overhead, recalling the bloody sun of the becalming (ll. 112–14). It is in danger of being "fixed" again, like a "painted ship" (ll. 384, 117–18); the situation before the "blessing" is partly re-enacted. The ship's struggle to proceed seems to represent the arbitrary or casual patterning of the Mariner's narrative, particularly its later stages: "Backwards and forwards half her length With a short uneasy motion" (ll. 387–8).

As the ship does cross the Line the Mariner swoons, and hears "in my soul" (l. 396) an awkwardly staged dialogue between two daemonic spirits. This "miraculous" device seems to have several purposes. It is to cover returning the ship to near harbour without supernatural complication, although to avoid such complication a trivializing mechanical explanation of the trick is given ("The air is cut away before, And closes from behind," ll. 424–25). Secondly it is to supply the Mariner himself with an explanation of the events that his experiences hardly support, that is that they have been the revenge of the Polar Spirit (for what?). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it is to make clear that suffering is not over and may never be over ("The man hath penance done, And penance more will do," ll. 408–9).

When the Mariner wakes he is again accused by the dead, their eyes now glittering in the moonlight, and the power to pray has been withdrawn:

> All fixed on me their stony eyes,
> That in the Moon did glitter. . . .
>
> I could not draw my eyes from theirs,
> Nor turn them up to pray.
> (ll. 436–7, 440–41)

It is as if the Mariner is held by the eyes of the dead as his eyes are to hold the Wedding Guest; and for both, that is until "this spell was snapt" (l. 442). (The gloss to that phrase, "The curse is finally expiated," is most probably a late attempt by Coleridge to foist a happier conclusion on the poem, and the rest of the

poem does not bear it out.)

The remainder of the homeward voyage is given by two images. The first is an echoing of the motiveless pursuit of the north wind on the outward leg, which drove the crew down to the Antarctic (ll. 45–50):

> Like one, that on a lonesome road
> Doth walk in fear and dread,
> And having once turned round walks on,
> And turns no more his head;
> Because he knows, a frightful fiend
> Doth close behind him tread.
>
> (ll. 446–51)

The Wedding Guest's first reaction to "the fiends that plague thee thus" (ll. 79–80) comes across the length of the poem.

The second image, held against the first, recalls the brief respite of the "sweet jargoning" (l. 362) of the spirits who animated the crew, and the "pleasant noise" made by the sails in response (ll. 367–72). Now, the wind that "nor sound nor motion made" seems to be

> Like a meadow-gale of spring—
> It mingled strangely with my fears,
> Yet it felt like a welcoming.
>
> (ll. 453, 457–9)

The images of fear and welcome, lonesome road and meadow, are put before us almost as representing opposing ways of understanding the whole narrative.

"Welcoming" introduces the Mariner's crossing the harbour bar and regaining sight (in reverse order, for landfall) of lighthouse, hill, and kirk (ll. 464–8). Now, though, the landmarks of safety are in the light and shadow of the moon; the known and familiar landscape is seen anew, and with fear.

In the lines omitted after 1798, the "Hands of Glory" passage, dark red shadows rise from the harbour waters. As they mount the ship to take over the dead bodies they throw their red glare upon the Mariner and are seen "in fear and dread" to be like human torches. They gather on the deck, as the spirit-bodies gathered to render their "sweet jargoning", burning their right arms:

> The bodies had advanc'd, and now
> Before the mast they stood.
>
> They lifted up their stiff right arms,
> They held them straight and tight;
> And each right-arm burnt like a torch,
> A torch that's borne upright.

Their stony eye-balls glittered on
In the red and smoky light.
(between ll. 475–80)

The alterations to the poem have left behind some stumbling but the original intention remains, I think, clear.[34] The red shadows appear again. But this second time (or one time in the later versions) they become a band of seraphs mounting the corpses, each "a man all light." Now they do not burn hellishly but "This seraph-band, each waved his hand," signalling to the shore (ll. 490–96). Coleridge's intention was to hark back to the fate of the souls of the seamen, left aside after the men were claimed by Death. The souls have been in purgatory and are now released "to bliss or woe." It is only the Mariner who is not released. Their last act is to summon the representatives of faith and family, the Hermit and the Pilot and his boy.

The welcomers "cheer" the ship on its return as, one presumes, they did on its departure, but without answer. As they row out, they see its rotten state. The Hermit unwittingly makes the connection with the spectre-ship, which in effect it has become ("The planks look warped! and see those sails, How thin they are and sere!," ll. 529–30); and a moment later he relates its appearance to a world which is not that of "the leafy month of June" but is bleak and ravenous:

When the ivy-tod is heavy with snow,
And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,
That eats the she-wolf's young.
(ll. 535–7)

When the ship sinks suddenly, "like lead", as the Albatross had fallen "like lead into the sea" (ll. 549, 291), the Mariner is picked up. To those of the familiar world, it seems that the devil speaks and moves. The Pilot falls in a fit, and the Hermit prays, perhaps against fiends. When the Mariner seizes the oars in a bid for safety (his third act in the poem), the boy goes mad.

The Hermit, or what he stands for, had seemed a final hope of release: "He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away The Albatross's blood." But when asked for absolution the Hermit crosses himself for his own protection against what his faith cannot understand, and asks, "What manner of man art thou?" (ll. 512, 574–7).

There is, then, no release from Life-in-Death, no redemptive

34 While I agree with Empson and Pirie (and others) about the importance of these lines, I do not think they are evidence for a "disturbing duality" of the dead; nor that they can be restored, as in their eclectic text, without creating further difficulties. See pp. 69–77, 239–41.

grace for what has not, in any orthodox sense, been a sin. Throughout the familiar world of Christian optimism and innocence, merriment and celebration, the Mariner must for ever attempt to answer that last question by teaching his tale, compelled by the lure of momentary relief from its agony:

> Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
> With a woful agony,
> Which forced me to begin my tale;
> And then it left me free.
>
> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns:
> And till my ghastly tale is told,
> This heart within me burns.
>
> I pass, like night, from land to land;
> I have strange power of speech;
> That moment that his face I see,
> I know the man that must hear me:
> To him my tale I teach.
>
> (ll. 578–90)

Coleridge knew there was no release, no "moral miracle." That is why he was struck by the fashionable figure of the Wandering Jew, not because that figure offered opportunity for tickling up the appetite. Part of what the Wedding Guest must have recognized, from the very telling of the tale, was how often it had been told before, from when the Mariner was a young sailor. Coleridge himself commented, on an illustration of the Mariner which showed him to be an old man when on board ship, that it was "an enormous blunder" so to represent him:

> He was in my mind the everlasting wandering Jew—had told this story ten thousand times since the voyage, which was in his early youth and 50 years before.[35]

The Mariner's tale always leaves its mark, on Hermit or on Wedding Guest, in whatever land and language. None can fully grasp what is taught about a universe neither innocent nor fallen but simply one in which arbitrariness, the dice, rules; and yet responsibility for action and its consequences on individual, family and society cannot be avoided. (This is the world of the merchant and the date shell.) The Wedding Guest wakes "a sadder and a wiser man" but there is no way, beyond the teaching of the tale, in which that wisdom can be brought into familiar terms. Perhaps the Mariner himself understands least of all. He always

35 *Notebooks*, I, Pt. 2, no. 45n.

wants "To walk together to the kirk, With a goodly company" (ll. 605–6) and does not know why he never succeeds, but only succeeds in preventing others from enjoying that familiar security, as the Guest is held from the wedding; why the power of prayer was offered, mockingly, and withdrawn. His attempt to reduce the experience to a formula is marked by its complete inadequacy, from its opening bland assertion of what he cannot himself do:

> He prayeth well, who loveth well
> Both man and bird and beast.
>
> He prayeth best, who loveth best
> All things both great and small;
> For the dear God who loveth us,
> He made and loveth all.
> (ll. 612–17)

This is not what the tale teaches. To those who believe that it is, one is best to quote Dr Johnson: "that poetry and virtue go always together is an opinion so pleasing that I can forgive him who resolves to think it true."[36] Coleridge could not answer his questions about the powers that move the world, "Quid agunt? quae loca habitant?" other than by the Mariner's tale itself.

36 Johnson, *Life of Gray*.