

The Uncomprehending Narrator in *The Ancient Mariner*

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In an article in *Sydney Studies in English* in 1982, G. L. Little revisited the question of the 'moral' of *The Ancient Mariner*, with the dissonant impressions given by the narrative and the gloss, and remarked 'Perhaps the Mariner himself understands least of all.'¹ This note takes up the issue of the degree of that understanding. It is concerned with the poem as it appeared in 1798, at the threshold of *Lyrical Ballads*. The mariner belongs in the company of the Female Vagrant, the Mad Mother, the Convict and other examples of 'low and rustic life'² who appear in that volume, and his functions as narrator are best understood in that context.

In Coleridge's account of the genesis of *Lyrical Ballads*, in Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria*, the subjects 'chosen from ordinary life ... such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity', were strictly the province of Wordsworth. In the poems Coleridge was to contribute, on the other hand, 'the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural'. While this division of labour was to produce 'two sorts' of poems, both were to be characterised by 'a faithful adherence to the truth of nature', the supernatural subjects appealing through their 'dramatic truth' — 'the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real'. 'And real in *this* sense', Coleridge continues, 'they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.'³

- 1 G. L. Little, 'No Moral Miracle: A Reading of *The Ancient Mariner*', *Sydney Studies in English*, 8 (1982-3), 44.
- 2 Wordsworth's phrase in the 1800 preface.
- 3 *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1949), ii. 5-6. I do not venture into the varying accounts by Wordsworth and Coleridge of their collaboration, and of their intentions in *Lyrical Ballads*.

While the Mariner's tale belongs clearly enough to a world in which 'the incidents and agents were ... in part at least, supernatural', the mariner himself must be related to the 'ordinary life' of 'every village and its vicinity'. He is an untutored seaman, who brings to his tale the mental equipment of his fellow villagers and rustics. The Mariner is if anything more untutored than they, an 'ancient' from an earlier generation: Coleridge thought of him as relating these incidents fifty years after they had occurred.⁴ Whether or not the poem is set in the middle ages (the period of hermits and cross-bows), its primitiveness is clearly emphasized. It is like another of Percy's 'reliques'.

This is especially true of the 1798 text, 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'. The diction is archaic, there is no gloss to dignify the narrative, there are no such labels as Life-in-Death attached to figures in the tale. The changes made to the text in 1800 — when it was sub-titled 'A Poet's Reverie' — and in 1817 and 1834 diminished these features, possibly in response to criticisms that the poem was too naive and uncouth.

One of Wordsworth's objections, that the Mariner 'does not act, but is continually acted upon'⁵, points, in its wrong-headedness, to the distinctive quality of the Mariner's experience. He is an uncomprehending narrator. We need always to distinguish between his account of his experience, and his interpretation of his experience. While the events are to be accepted as the Mariner reports them, his evaluation — especially in moral or religious terms — is another matter. The Mariner's comments, most often in the form of exclamations, are always dramatically appropriate, but to confine the meaning of the poem to them is indeed to

4 An item of table talk recorded by Kathleen Coburn in *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York, 1957), I. (*Notes*) no. 45.

5 'Note to the Ancient Mariner' in the 1800 edition in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London, Methuen, 1965), p. 277. All quotations from the 1798 text of *The Ancient Mariner* are from this edition.

confine its meaning. Coleridge's own intrusion into the dramatic process by means of the gloss was intended to elevate the poem, but may have had the effect of limiting it. The 1798 version offers the best opportunity of recovering its meaning.

The voyage southward is reported graphically, with images drawn from explorers' journals ('Ice mast-high came floating by'), until the ship is apparently hemmed in by the icebergs. The first step towards interpretation is taken with the appearance of the albatross:

At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the Fog it came;
And an it were a Christian soul,
We hail'd it in God's name.

(ll. 61-4)

'And an it were' means 'And as if it were': this is a conjecture by the Mariner and his shipmates, assigning a role to the bird and fixing it in a religious framework. The suggestion of divine intervention is strengthened as the ice splits, the south wind springs up behind (now driving the ship northward) and 'for vespers nine' the albatross accompanies the ship. At this point the Wedding Guest interrupts:

'God save thee, ancyent Marinere!
From the fiends that plague thee thus —
Why look'st thou so?' — with my cross bow
I shot the Albatross.

(ll. 77-80)

In the Mariner's account, the shooting of the albatross is unmotivated, and inexplicable. It remains so to the end of the poem. The inscrutability of the event is demonstrated in the responses of the Mariner's shipmates, who at first blame him for what they see as the consequences of his act:

And I had done an hellish thing
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird
That made the Breeze to blow

(ll. 89-92)

and then reverse this view, on the appearance of the 'glorious Sun':

Then all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird
 That brought the fog and mist.
 'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay
 That bring the fog and mist.
 (ll. 95-8)

The crew's attitude changes again as the ship is becalmed under the pitiless sun, and they attribute their miseries to a Spirit who has pursued them from the land of mist and snow. The narrator records that 'some' have been assured of this 'in dreams' (l. 127).

The poem generates a sense of guilt and punishment that is never fully accounted for. As abruptly as he had reported the shooting of the albatross, the Mariner announces the displacement of the cross from around his neck:

Ah wel-a-day! what evil looks
 Had I from old and young;
 Instead of the Cross the Albatross
 About my neck was hung.
 (ll. 135-8)

How has this come about? Is it the work of his shipmates? Is it due to some supernatural agency? Is it the Mariner's metaphor for his situation? The poem does not pause to enquire, but moves immediately to the sighting of the spectre ship. The account of this in 1798 is more concerned with the ship's appearance than its meaning. As the ship seems to offer hope of rescue, the Mariner bites his arm and sucks the blood in order to hail it; the crew, in another volte-face, 'for joy did grin' (l. 155) at the prospect. But the ship is a skeleton ship, its only crew 'That woman and her fleshless Pheere' (l. 180), playing a game of dice. 'She is far liker Death than he' (l. 189) is the only statement that approaches interpretation: I take it as part of her physical description, along with the red lips, the free looks, the yellow hair and the leprous flesh. 'Death' is probably used in the sense of skeleton (OED death *sb.* 1.c), the 'fleshless Man' of

Coleridge's marginal annotation.⁶ Not until 1817 did the woman become 'Life-in-Death', at a level of abstraction probably beyond the Mariner.

The 1798 text seems to insist on the Mariner's limited understanding. This is crucial to the episode of the water-snakes. Isolated in the rotting sea with the fifty dead men on the deck, the Mariner tries to pray but cannot:

I look'd to Heaven, and try'd to pray;
 But or ever a prayer had gusht,
 A wicked whisper came and made
 My heart as dry as dust.

(ll. 236-9)

The nature of the 'wicked whisper' is not explained, but it seems to be something outside the Mariner's volition. This is again the case at the critical point of the poem, when the reflection of the moonlight on the water-snakes creates a world of beauty:

Within the shadow of the ship
 I watch'd their rich attire:
 Blue, glossy green, and velvet black
 They coil'd and swam; and every track
 Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue
 Their beauty might declare:

⁶ In a stanza written in the margin of a copy of the 1798 text (*Poetical Works*, ed. E.H. Coleridge, p. 194):

This Ship it was a plankless thing,
 — A bare Anatomy!
 A plankless Spectre — and it mov'd
 Like a Being of the Sea!
 The Woman and a fleshless Man
 Therein sate merrily.

In 1817 the man is still a skeleton, 'a DEATH', not 'DEATH':

Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
 Is DEATH that woman's mate?

A spring of love gusht from my heart,
 And I bless'd them unaware!
 Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
 And I bless'd them unaware.

(ll. 269-79)

'A spring of love gusht from my heart' — this is an involuntary action, as the next line makes plain: 'And I bless'd them unaware'. The key word is 'unaware' (which is to be repeated): the Mariner blesses the water-snakes without knowing that he does so, or why. The following lines are his attempt to explain what has happened:

Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
 And I bless'd them unaware.

'Sure' may mean 'I am sure'. Or it may mean 'surely', 'it must be the case that', indicating that the Mariner does not know. Whatever the reading, the lines acknowledge that the agency involved is again outside the Mariner himself.

Here and elsewhere in the poem the Mariner is using such religious knowledge as he has in order to make sense of events. He knows about saints, and apparently believes that they intervene in human affairs. He has already invoked the Virgin Mary at the appearance of the spectre ship ('Heaven's mother send us grace' - l. 170), and after the albatross has fallen from his neck and sleep descends, he gives praise to her:

To Mary-queen the praise be yeven
 She sent the gentle sleep from heaven
 That slid into my soul.

(ll. 286-8)

The birds' 'sweet jargoning' will for the Mariner resemble 'an angel's song' (l. 354). In a 'swound' (l. 397) or 'trance' (l. 434) he will hear 'two voices in the air', one asserting that he 'penance more will do' (l. 414). The Mariner will accordingly appeal to the Hermit to shrieve his soul and wash away the blood of the albatross.

These religious references have remained about the neck of subsequent criticism. They seem to me the rudimentary concepts which a villager or seaman of the world of *Lyrical Ballads* might entertain. They have been adduced in support of the claim that whether or not the poem is medieval, its religious thinking is pre-Reformation. It is in any case difficult to argue for a redemptive pattern on these grounds, when the blessing of the water-snakes is as inexplicable as the shooting of the albatross had been. The Mariner naturally resorts to familiar ideas of sin and expiation, but as these are in his consciousness, their status must be equivocal. (If the working of the ship by the dead crew really symbolizes the resurrection — an idea which is not advanced by the Mariner — then readers of the poem hoping for resurrection might well think again.)

An alternative pattern can be proposed, drawing on the theology of grace. If the blessing of the water-snakes happens independently of the Mariner's will, this is consistent with the doctrine that the operation of grace is not contingent on human action or desert. It is not something to be earned, or brought about by particular behaviour or state of feeling: it is the exercise of God's will. (The Adam of *Paradise Lost* is forgiven before he has repented, although his repentance is still valued in the poem.) The Mariner's inability to understand what has happened could therefore authenticate the operation of grace (at a theological level beyond his conceptual range).

If this is indeed the interpretation which the poem urges, it is odd that the gloss gives no hint of it. The gloss added so many years later makes a number of efforts to elevate the poem, but this is not one of them. At the crucial point it reads 'He blesseth them in his heart' and then against the next stanza 'The spell begins to break'. In representing the event in terms of the breaking of a spell, the gloss is at this point reflecting the mentality of the narrator, who at l. 447 says 'the spell was snapt' which locked his eyes to those of his shipmates. The gloss now says (untruthfully) 'The curse is finally expiated'. In both 1798 and 1817, the language of

spells and curses has a pagan quality, alien to the world of Christian grace. The redemption theory must fail on any count, as the Mariner is left as a tormented figure. The pattern, if it exists, is never completed.

The Mariner's efforts to interpret his experience extend to his admonitions to the Wedding Guest. Mrs Barbauld's complaint that the poem 'had no moral' drew Coleridge's response that it 'had too much; and that the only, or chief fault ... was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination'.⁷ He did not however change the 'moral stanzas':

Farewel, farewell! but this I tell
 To thee, thou wedding-guest!
 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. 643-50)

Critics have objected to reading 650 lines of verse in order to learn to be kind to animals. While this may distort what the Mariner is saying, are not these sentiments appropriate to his character? They belong to the simplicity of the folk poetry that in 1798 Coleridge was trying to cultivate and that in 1817 he may have been trying to disavow. They are the conclusions that Betty Foy or Simon Lee might have reached, on similar evidence. By the time of his conversation with Mrs Barbauld, they might have come to seem to Coleridge too naive for the critical audience which had developed, but their simplicity makes them the more authentic.

The critical audience since has continued to engage with the poem through the consciousness of the narrator. He

⁷ *Table Talk*, 31 May 1830.

confronts this bewildering sequence of events with his semi-pagan ideas of curses and spells, stock notions of guilt and punishment, pleas for rituals of expiation and forgiveness. The gloss⁸ introduces another persona: that of the learned antiquary, with speculations on Josephus and Michael Psellus, distinguishing daemons of the middle air from the angelic troop, but a myopic interpreter still. At various points the poem may seem to yield to these formulae, but it keeps generating meanings which go beyond them.

In separating his role from Wordsworth's in *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge made a particular stipulation about his own subject-matter:

it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.⁹

The interpretation of this passage has fixed on the 'suspension of disbelief', to the neglect of the way in which it is to be brought about. The essential process is described as a transference: 'to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth'. The narrator of the tale (and secondarily, the author of the gloss) is the agent of this process, testifying to 'the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situation, supposing them real'. His incomprehension intensifies the effect.

8 See Lawrence Lipking, 'The Marginal Gloss', *Critical Enquiry* 3 (1977), 609-665.

9 *Biographica Literaria*, ii. 6.