

Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner"—Rime or Ballad?

IT is generally felt that any attempt to evaluate Coleridge's poetic achievement in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" comes up against a certain "blur"—a feeling that there is something in the final, total effect of the poem which cannot be localized and therefore cannot be examined and analyzed. D. W. Harding, in his article in "Scrutiny" (1941) on the theme of "The Ancient Mariner" begins: "The compelling quality of "The Ancient Mariner," more than of many poems, is difficult to identify with any confidence." Harding quite convincingly disposes of Marius Bewley's proposition (in "Scrutiny"—1940) that "In "The Ancient Mariner" the difficulty exists in a suggestion of moral purpose—a suggestion so elusive that it is of no value, yet sufficiently present to implore our assent to pretensions that a more detailed examination must reject. There is, in short, an ambiguity of motive, of creative purpose, in the poem."

Harding very finely relates the Ancient Mariner's experience to the personal expression of Coleridge's own feelings in poems such as "Dejection" and "Pains of Sleep" and shows up as superficial Bewley's statement that "It is not likely that words of such impersonal calculation should have led on to poetic attempts whose roots were buried deep in the essential impulses of the man." However, to my mind, Harding complicates matters unnecessarily when he relates the man who suffered and the artist who created: "The depth of meaning it held for him (i.e. Coleridge) is indicated in the curious self-exculpation with which he ends "The Pains of Sleep." That poem is a fragment of case-history recounting three nights of bad dreams. . . . Characteristically, he assumed that these sufferings must be a punishment for something or other. Yet by the standards of waking life and reason he feels himself to be innocent. . . . The Ancient Mariner committed the sin. Yet Coleridge knew that by the ordinary standards of the workaday world his act was not, after all, very terrible. Hence the sarcastic stanzas which show the indifference of the other mariners to the real meaning of the deed. At first—

"Ah wretch! Said they, the bird to slay,
That made the breeze to blow."

and then,

"'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay
That bring the fog and mist."

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

Now, it seems to me that the words of the mariners in the above stanzas cannot be described merely as being expressions of indifference. The mariners obviously regard the albatross as something more than a bird ; it is for them an omen, but their rapid reversal of their interpretation of, and their attitude to the omen shows it to be more or less the superstitiousness characteristic of all seafaring men ; nor is it suggested that the Ancient Mariner's attitude, just after killing the albatross, is very different from their's. In fact, ever since the beginning of the voyage he has been a part of the little community on board the ship. Together with the rest of the crew he seems to exult in the fact that he

“ had killed the Bird

That brought the fog and mist.”

in the free and ecstatic movement of the stanza which follows—

“ The breezes blew, the white foam flew,

The furrow followed free . . . ”

However, the development of the tale from this point onwards involves a growing consciousness that the mariners' attitude to the albatross cannot be dismissed merely as superstition—the bird itself is something more than an omen. A causal connexion is suggested between the killing of the albatross and the fortunes of the ship. At first—apparently inconsistently—

“ Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,

The glorious Sun uprist.”

This, it appears, is a test of the depth of the mariners' belief—“ When the fog cleared off, they justify the same, and thus make themselves accomplices in the crime.”—Coleridge. Soon, however, “ the ship is suddenly becalmed ”—

“ The very deeps did rot ; O Christ !

That ever this should be !

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs

Upon the slimy sea.”

The recurrent references to “ God's own head,” and to Christ suggest that the killing of the albatross was an act of sin in the Christian sense ; moreover—

“ Instead of the Cross the Albatross

About my neck was hung.”

The Ancient Mariner's purgatory now begins ; and the connexion between the sinful deed and the suffering is apparently felt by the Ancient Mariner during this part of his experience. That connexion becomes explicit, indubitable, when he blesses the creatures “ unaware ” and the albatross falls off and sinks “ like lead into the sea.” And at no point does the Ancient

COLERIDGE'S ANCIENT MARINER

Mariner himself feel that "by the ordinary standards of the workaday world his act was not, after all, very terrible." The blessing which he utters apparently has to rise from as deep a level as that of the "social union" he had destroyed when he killed the albatross; it comes almost by accident, as it were, without conscious effort on the part of the Ancient Mariner after his terrible suffering. The falling off of the albatross is the Ancient Mariner's moment of full realization of what was being darkly suggested to him during his suffering.

It is with Part 5 of the poem that the Ancient Mariner's recovery begins; significantly, he is able to enjoy sleep—

"O sleep, it is a gentle thing
Beloved from pole to pole!"

Through sleep he is able to escape the physical and mental torture that he has been undergoing. Heaven also sends him rain—a richly evocative symbol working as a means of refreshment, regeneration and growth on the Ancient Mariner's desiccated spirit ("My heart as dry as dust"). Angelic spirits enter the bodies of the dead crew and begin to work the ship. And when, at dawn

"... they dropped their arms,
And clustered round the mast:
Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths,
And from their bodies passed."

These sounds remind the Ancient Mariner of life on land—

"Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the skylark sing..."

And when these sounds cease, he hears the sails making a pleasant noise whilst the ship moves quietly on without a breeze—

"A noise like of a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune."

The elaboration of the simile is entirely functional here. Coleridge achieves through it a full-toned lyricism—rare in this poem—which accords perfectly with the progress of recovery in the Ancient Mariner. Natural fullness, plenitude, peace, harmony and comfort are all suggested by its details. The lyric note recurs after the curse is expiated and "the spell is snapt"—

"But soon there breathed a wind on me,
Nor sound nor motion made....."

It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek
Like a meadow-gale of spring."

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

From the account of the poem I have given above, the step from sin and penance to the moral would seem to be a simple one. And Coleridge gives it to us at the end, directly and unambiguously stated—

“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.”

Marius Bewley has it that “the moral value of the poem is sacrificed to the attainment of a somewhat frivolous distinction ;” and he would like to see the moral interest stressed. But the main criticism against the moral tag at the end of the poem is its very obviousness, its attempt to state and insist upon a moral point out of the Ancient Mariner’s experience. So that any further stress on the moral interest in the poem as Marius Bewley desires would, I think, result in a worse, rather than a better poem ; especially because, if the ‘moral interest’ is taken to be the obvious Christian one stated at the end, it can hardly be said to be a very interesting one in itself. One is reminded of Anton Chekhov’s letter to his publisher Suvorin when the latter had condemned his short story “The Horse-Thieves” on the ground that it lacked a moral point—“You find fault with my objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, an absence of ideals and ideas, and so forth. You want me when I describe horse-thieves, to say ‘The stealing of horses is an evil.’ But after all, that’s long been known without me showing it. Leave it to the magistrates to condemn them. My job is simply *to show what they’re like* . . . Of course, it would be pleasant to combine art with sermonizing, but for me personally that is exceptionally difficult and almost impossible.” Coleridge would heartily have concurred, for his own critical theory does not demand an overtly didactic purpose in art, requiring the reader to be as easily moved and edified as the wedding guest is at the end of the tale—

“A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.”

The point is that Coleridge is interested in showing what the Ancient Mariner “is like.” And this complicates the naively stated Christian moral—even contradicts the simple movement of the poem in Christian terms of Sin, penance, and regeneration. The fault of the Christian moral tag is

COLERIDGE'S ANCIENT MARINER

that it tends to limit the real, human experience of the poem to something which might be useful propaganda for the S.P.C.A. For Coleridge is interested in what happens to the mind of the Ancient Mariner when he undergoes his terrible penance ; when, for example—

“ Fear at my heart, as at a cup,
My life-blood seemed to sip.”

It is at this point that it would be pertinent to refer to the emotion behind Coleridge's extremely moving ode, “ Dejection ” in order to demonstrate the very personal springs of inspiration of “ The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” It is known that Coleridge keenly felt that his philosophical researches and “ subtle-souled ” psychologizing, with their intense intellectual activity were numbing his creative powers, especially his capacity to feel, to experience with full sensitivity. This is explicitly stated in “ Dejection ”—

“ But oh ! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.
For not to think of what I needs must feel,
But to be still and patient, all I can ;
And haply by abstruse research to steal
From my own nature all the natural man—
This was my sole resource, my only plan :
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.”

It is this laborious, dry, “ abstruse research ” that has resulted in his inability to respond to the moonlit night with its threat of storm—

“ I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling
The coming-on of rain and squally blast.
And oh ! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast !
Those sounds that oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live !”

“ Dull pain,” “ grief without a pang, void, dark and drear ” is the feeling throughout the poem. It is an unwholesome emotion and Coleridge recognizes this with tragic intensity. The similarity between this and the psychological definition of the experience of the Ancient Mariner is,

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

I think, close and unmistakable. For the mind of the Ancient Mariner is one that is strained almost to breaking-point—in his case not by “abstruse research,” but by the extreme physical and mental torture which his penance involves—

“ There passed a weary time. Each throat
Was parched, and glazed each eye. . . .”

“ With throats unslaked, with black lips baked. . . .”

“ I closed my lids, and kept them close,
And the balls like pulses beat ;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay like a load on my weary eye. . . .”

Whilst his penance expiates the sin, the experience of it leaves a permanent impress on the Ancient Mariner's mind. It has seared his brain, as it were, and rendered full, wholesome response to life impossible. The images of dryness in the lines quoted above are only some of the many in the poem which evoke a potent sense of something hot scorching the springs of feeling—perhaps the earthly equivalent of Purgatorial fires. Details of the Ancient Mariner's personal appearance dramatize his inner spiritual desiccation—his “long grey beard and glittering eye,” his feverish, bright eyes, his “skinny hand,” his body —

“ Long and lank and brown
As is the ribbed sea-sand.”

It is significant that his fate is to be decided (by Chance) not between Death and Life, but between Death and Life-in-Death. It is Life-in-Death who wins and saves the Ancient Mariner from Death. But the Mariner never recovers positive life, and his existence after suffering may adequately be described as Life-in-Death, something akin to the “dull pain” of the “Dejection” ode.

Thus the penance of the Ancient Mariner leaves its mark on his mind so that full regeneration is not achieved. He is incapable of participating fully and instinctively in the social life around him. (One contrasts this with the high spirits and camaraderie with which he had set sail with the rest of the crew—

“ The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop. . . .”)

COLERIDGE'S ANCIENT MARINER

He now feels restless constantly and can achieve some measure of temporary relief only when he purges himself of this gnawing feeling by relating his experiences to someone. He can never really experience the fullness of natural life—of the

“ hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.”

And it cannot be said that this incompleteness of recovery is due to the fact that the Ancient Mariner has not fully expiated his sin even after his return. For, in the first place, we do feel that the penance has been long enough and terrible enough. Moreover, Coleridge seems to suggest that the Ancient Mariner will *never* recover fully, whether he undergoes further penance or not—

“ Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns :
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.”

So that the question of further penance is really irrelevant. The faculties of the Ancient Mariner have been maimed permanently (and perhaps it is only the hand of Time that can bring the Ancient Mariner's mind back to anything like full recovery).

This psychological exploration of the Ancient Mariner's experience which accepts the fact that full regeneration is impossible seems to me to be much more realistic than the simple movement towards the expression of a specifically Christian moral point. It accepts the fact of real life, and it is based, as we saw, on Coleridge's own personal experience, whereas the attempt to propound a Christian moral is both limiting and unconvincing.

As mentioned before, the movement of the poem in terms of a Christian moral purpose—sin, penance, and restoration to Grace—is virtually contradicted by the realistic working out of the psychological interest which demonstrates that in fact regeneration is impossible. But it should also be stressed that this 'contradiction' does not result in mere confusion and frustration of any moral value in the poem. It results, on the other hand, in a rich complexity. In a sense, then, one could take the poem as a comment on simple Christian morality ; which would give “ He prayeth well who

loveth well” an ironic function almost. But the poem can also be read as an expression of the well-known theme of experience and old age. Thus the Ancient Mariner has gained some wisdom at the end out of his experience of suffering ; and this wisdom enables him to generalize (just as the Greek tragic hero is able to generalize and comment on the situation after suffering)—

“Farewell, farewell ! but this I tell
 To thee, thou Wedding- Guest !
 He prayeth well, who loveth well
 Both man and bird and beast.”

But—and this is what gives the poem a tragic note—the Ancient Mariner is ironically unable to use that wisdom in his practical life after he has undergone the experience through which he gained it. For his sensibility is maimed, he cannot enter into normal social life because of the suffering itself. It is only by becoming old that we become wise, and then because we are old we are unable to use that wisdom fully ; experience always comes too late. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is a poignant expression of this very human theme with its very basic, paradoxical truth.

And it is in the expression of this simple, basic truth that Coleridge’s use of the ballad form in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is seen to be functional. We tend to feel that Coleridge’s choice of the ballad structure in this poem was merely inevitable and explicable as being in tune with Romantic aesthetic interest in antiquity and folk songs, or as being suited to the subject-matter of story. Whilst the poem has some obvious features of sophisticated technique it is obvious that Coleridge is also interested in making it sound like a folk ballad. Coleridge’s creative artistry, then, is to be seen not only in the sophisticated literary elements but also in the creation of something that looks and sounds like a genuine folk ballad; the folksy quality is created by the same sophisticated technique, and one notices the use of short stanzas, occasional refrains and repetitions, and deliberate archaisms. Coleridge states his intention in the “Biographia Literaria” thus—“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.” And Harding suggests that such an intention can lead not only to the “frivolous distinction” of the sensational Tales of Terror and of the supernatural but also to “the vastly more signi-

COLERIDGE'S ANCIENT MARINER

ficant 'excellence' of dreams and fairy tales" but he leaves the point there. I feel that this kind of 'excellence' is certainly achieved by Coleridge in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"—and that it is achieved largely through the use of the ballad form; for the ballad form gives one the impression that this poem is an example of folk literature; and one of the characteristics of folk literature—including fairy tales—is the embodiment of a certain primitive wisdom, often the collective experience of a race. The ballad form helps to invest "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" with this significance.

Thus the 'excellence' of Coleridge's poem does not merely lie in the fact that it is a remarkable verse-tale of terror and the supernatural told with power and conviction. That would be an extremely limited—even vicious—kind of achievement with an emotional appeal hardly different from that of "the frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. . . . which blunt the discriminating powers of the mind"—Wordsworth, *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. What gives the poem moral excellence and significance is the exploration of the experience of the Ancient Mariner, heightened and made more suggestive by the use of the Ballad form.

KAMAL DE ABREW