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CONVERSION CONFUSION

COLERIDGE'S FAITH IN WRITING "THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER"

ABSTRACT: Some critics have argued that the moral truths of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are not only unintelligible but also irrational. But for other critics, this irrationality is what gives the poem its greatest quality. When examining the irrational and unintelligible sections of Coleridge's poem, a hermeneutic must be applied where the sections in question are not Coleridge's failure to explain the supernatural but actually an evidence of Coleridge's inner conflict with his conversion from Unitarianism to the Anglicanism religion.

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is said to be his attempt to bring supernatural terrors to a naturalistic setting. Some critics have argued that the moral truths of the poem are not only unintelligible but also irrational. But for other critics, this irrationality is what gives the poem its greatest quality. When analyzing and critiquing Coleridge's poem, an in depth analysis of the irrational is necessary. This irrationality is not Coleridge's failure to explain the supernatural but actually an evidence of its Christian moral code and that the poem's irrationality emerges because of Coleridge's inner conflict with his conversion from Unitarianism to the Anglicanism religion. This hermeneutic must be in mind when attempting to interpret Coleridge's poem.

Before we can look at modern critics such as Christopher Stokes, J Robert Barth, John T Netland, and even Jerome J. McGann, we must first look at how earlier critics have looked at Coleridge's work through a Christian eyes. The article "Coleridge And The Luminous Gloom: An Analysis Of The 'Symbolical Language' In 'The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner'" by Elliott B. Gose, Jr. examines the poem through a Christian perspective only because Gose believes "the poem is filled with Christian trappings" (239). Gose shows how symbols carry a Christian ideology and spends considerable time on examining how the sun (whether glorious or red) represents God while the other forces in the poem represent the forces of nature. In the end, Gose claims that nature is subordinate to God and that the Mariner's voyage does not deal with a physical voyage but it represents a "Romantic urge to explore the eternal soul and the temporal emotions" (244). But throughout the article, Gose fails to fully explain the other stranger elements in Coleridge's poem. For instance, he brings up life-in-death, who wins the Mariner in a gamble, but then dismisses her by stating how "she is obviously outside the Christian hierarchy and is connected with a whole strand of non-Christian figures, incidents, and images in the poem" (242). He interprets this from the obscure explanation given from the gloss and continues with the rest of the poem still in his Christian ideological framework. More modern critics will point out how though much of the poem seems to use Christian terms, the more stranger elements and the ambiguous details create distance between familiar and unfamiliar which gave trouble to many earlier Christian critical readings of Coleridge's text.

Gose's confusion with the gloss and its obscure Christian emphasis can be explained in "Reading and Resistance: The Hermeneutic Subtext of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by John T Netland. He suggests that the poem displays an "incongruous mixture of pagan and Christian symbols" (38) and examines the use of the gloss as a hermeneutic. Although the "gloss-writing editor" is responding to the original poem and seeks to interpret it for a modern audience, the editor marginalizes the Mariner's experiences and emphasizes the Christian overtones of the poem. Netland states the gloss and the poem itself create a unique tension "between contrasting religious imaginations" (41). One is a world of categorized and rational set of religious experiences (inferred from gloss) while the other a spiritual, mystical, irrational religious sublimity (from the poem). Netland states that Coleridge may have gotten his idea from Bibles at that time with their gloss notes that gave a clearer interpretation of the biblical text. This is very similar to Jerome J. McGann's examinations in his brilliant article, "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner", where McGann briefly details the poem's history from its initial criticism to Coleridge's embracing of Christian ideology to his Higher Critical analytics of the re-interpretative process of the Bible to Coleridge's attempt in mimicking this layered

hermeneutic upon his own work. McGann points to the fact that Coleridge's poem was originally a literary ballad among all the other lyrical ballads found Wordsworth's printed work, *Lyrical Ballads*. With the second edition, and with Wordsworth's concerns, Coleridge made alterations to make the poem less a literary ballad and more a lyrical ballad. Coleridge may have realized what he was doing was similar to what occurred in Biblical narratives. Coleridge had argued in length on issues of Higher Criticism that Scriptures were "not an unmediated and fixed biblical text but an evolved and continuously evolving set of records which include the Church's later glosses on and interpretations of the earlier documents" (47). McGann remarkably suggests that Coleridge's revised version of his poem shows four clear layers of development: "(a) an original mariner's tale; (b) the ballad narrative of that story; (c) the editorial gloss added when the ballad was, we are to suppose, first printed; and (d) Coleridge's own point of view on his invented materials" (50). The last shows Coleridge's own theory of religious and symbolic interpretation. McGann believes that "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is Coleridge's imitation of "a culturally redacted literary work" (51).

But coming back to Netland's article, the gloss, he believes, becomes an inadequate hermeneutic for analyzing the poem. Netland suggests that the gloss is inadequate as a hermeneutic since the editor reduces the Mariner's spiritual journey, actions, and sufferings into a straight-forward neat plot to emphasize Christian redemption. Netland states that "the Mariner...has experienced something of the religious sublime (whether real or delusive), and his compulsive retellings of his story point to the inexplicable profundity of his experience" (51). The writer of the gloss fails to understand this and the gloss represses the Mariner's heightened religious experience. Netland suggests that we instead respond like the stunned Wedding Guest which is far more consistent to Coleridgean hermeneutics when analyzing the journey of the Mariner.

But can the gloss be ignored? McGann disagrees and states that the changes (as well as the addition of the gloss) from 1798 to 1817 show an important story in Coleridge's development of the purposes of his poem. Many believed that these changes were "a reactionary movement in which a daring and radical poem is transformed into a relatively tame work of Christian symbolism" (42) when Coleridge retreated from his radical views to his later Christian ideology. McGann, in his article, dives deeply into Coleridge's understanding of the Higher Critical analysis of the Christian Bible to show Coleridge's Hermeneutic Model of his poem originating from his ideas of the process of the Bible's creation. Coleridge saw how God's Word was "expressed and later reexpressed through commentary, gloss, and interpretation by particular people at different times according to their differing lights" (43). Coleridge's poem is presented as just this type of reinterpreted text retaining its own ideological coherence even through the fragmentation from reinterpretation. McGann states that the poem shows Coleridge's process of "textual evolution" and the symbolic meaning of that process is a Christian redemptive one.

We can see how the very nature of religion affected Coleridge in his earlier 1798 version and his later 1817 version (with gloss) and can conclude that the poet himself and his faith must be examined. J. Robert Barth's book, *Romanticism and Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious Imagination*, delves deeply into Coleridge's theories, struggles, and faith. Although, he spends the first four chapter exploring Wordsworth's works and how it

practices Coleridge's theories of imagination, he examines closely the nature of religion in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in chapter 6. Although Coleridge had theological speculations, he was a "practical Christian" (89). Coleridge believed in living out the practical aspects of his faith. Barth does not give a complete examination of Coleridge's poem, but hones in to what he believes gives strength and beauty to Coleridge's poetry. The notion of "polarity" (a "balance or reconciliation of opposites" (6)) is central to Coleridge's theories of imagination. Opposite objects, qualities, or "tensions exist within the same 'field of force'" (6). Barth also looks at prayer as a means of bringing these two forces into harmony (natural and supernatural). Coleridge is concerned with prayer but at a deeper level as a means of "uniting the creature with the Creator" (90). Coleridge's guilt and need for redemption is bound to his longing for forgiveness and friendship with God. Coleridge calls prayer the "the effort to connect the misery of Self with the blessedness of God" (90). It is a means of connecting the natural to the supernatural, the temporal to the eternal, and the immanent to the transcendent. Barth states that even though Coleridge does move from his Unitarian ideology to his Christian ideology, a shift that can be seen in the poem and its revision, this idea of prayer is still deep within Coleridge's soul. Although, Barth explores prayer within the poem during Coleridge's conversion, this shift of faith can be explored further as means for a proper hermeneutic in interpreting Coleridge's poem.

Christopher Stokes' article "My Soul In Agony!: Irrationality And Christianity In The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner" explores the struggle between the physical and the spiritual world in Coleridge's poem. His poem contains strange elements that seem unintelligible and irrational. Stokes states that these elements stem from Coleridge's Unitarian moral theory that he subscribed to at the time. Because these strange elements are unintelligible, there is an ambiguity between the supernatural events and orthodox religion. Though much of the poem seems to use Christian terms, there is still details that are ambiguous and this creates distance between familiar and unfamiliar. Stokes states that these ambiguous moments create a divided tone and he claims this is from Coleridge's difficult transition from Unitarianism to Anglican Christianity. Coleridge struggled with Christianity's concept of "original sin" and a closer examination must be conducted to understand why he possibly struggled with the concept.

The concept and doctrine of "Original Sin" was developed by the early Roman church and was based on Paul's teachings found in the Book of Romans. In the Old Testament (specifically from Genesis), Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden and the result was that they were cursed and banished out of the Garden. Because of the actions of Adam and Eve, "sin" (a propensity to disobey God) originated in the Garden and continued to all future generations. Paul teaches a reinterpretation of this Genesis story. In Romans 5.12, Paul states that "just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned." At the time of Paul's teaching, audiences of the early Gospels will be familiar with the story of Jesus (especially since Mark and Matthew may have been circulating prior to Romans being written). The audiences would understand that Jesus died as a sacrificial lamb for the sins (actual personal committed sins; a personal disobedience) of all man. But Paul goes to reinterpret Christ's death to add that Jesus died to not only remove our personal sins but also to remove the hold of original sin on humanity

which results in death. "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5.19). This meant that all humanity was guilty for their personal sins and guilty for the sin of Adam and Eve that was passed to generations.

Later under the Roman church, Saint Augustine of Hippo taught that all of humanity was in a state of sin that came from Adam. Man is born with sin and a weakened free-will that gravitates toward sin. Adam and Eve's sin and guilt is carried onto each generation (Kelley, 34-38). This was the concept of "Original Sin." This is a belief that is still held today by Catholics and Protestants (although, it may vary based on demonization).

But Unitarians do not believe in the concept of "Original Sin." They do not believe that the sin of Adam and Eve corrupted all of humanity and that we still carry their guilt. They state "it would contradict the love and justice of God to attribute to us the sin of others, because sin is one's own personal action" (József, 107). This was a key to why Coleridge struggled in his conversion to Christianity and is evident in his poem. Stokes, in his article, explains the struggle readers have with the strange and irrational elements in the poem are reflective and evidence of Coleridge's struggle in his departure from Unitarian ideology to Anglican ideology. An example can be seen with the killing of the Albatross which many critics agree is a strange element to the poem. The Mariner simply kills the bird with no thought prior and the only shock is from the Wedding Guest. The crew at first thought it wrong, but then agreed that the bird was bad luck. Without the gloss notes (and in the original 1798 version), it seems that even nature is unmoved by something that seemed like a crime and the reader isn't given any reason that the killing set any clear event in motion (a "determinative effects of motives" based on Unitarian moral theory (5)). The albatross' death is a "powerful but initially unintelligible event" but has "no obvious moral or religious significance" (6).

Coleridge, after his conversion and firming in Christian ideology, comes to term with original sin and revises his work (through additions, subtractions, and including a gloss for the poem) giving it a more Anglican tone. The gloss becomes an Anglican hermeneutic bringing the poem under a Christian ideology and moral order. The poem under the gloss gives it a Christian "salvational trajectory" (20). It is only through the gloss (and Coleridge's later revision in 1817) that we learn that "the ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen." Stokes understands the common critical belief that "the Mariner conspicuously relies on Christian rituals and beliefs . . . the Christian doctrine fails to explain his world of excessive suffering and irrational events" (11). But he states that before we dismiss these strange elements as irrational, we must explore Coleridge's religious thinking at the time of writing the poem and both its revisions. It is only through the examination of his personal faith and conversion that we can develop a proper hermeneutic to interpret Coleridge's poem.

It would be erroneous to assume irrationality as a failure of the poem's Christian moral code. One must look at Coleridge's conversion as well as his struggle with the Christian doctrine of original sin that creates the irrational or at least creates ambiguous language. It is only through this hermeneutic that we can fully understand and appreciate Coleridge's poem where he attempts to understand and present to us the concepts that are beyond understanding.

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