

Coleridge: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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Robert Penn Warren, "A Poem of Pure Imagination"

- "The fable, in broadest and simplest terms, is a story of crime and punishment and repentance and reconciliation..." (Warren 22).
- "What is the nature of this sin, what is its content?" (26).
 - "But why did the poet not give us a literal murder in the first place? ... we must remember that the crime, to maintain its symbolic reference to the Fall, must be motiveless.... The poet's problem, then, was to provide an act which,... would not... distract from the symbolic significance, but ... would be adequately criminal to justify the consequences" (27).
 - "But we must remember [also] ... a manifestation of a deeper concern, a sacramental conception of the universe, for the bird is hailed "in God's name," both literally and symbolically, and in the end we have, therefore, in the crime against Nature a crime against God" (27).
 - "And the death of the creature of God, like the death of the Son of God, will, in its own way, work for vision and salvation...." (28).

More R.P. Warren...

- "If the Mariner returns to celebrate the chain of love which binds human society and the universe, the fact should remind us that the occasion is a wedding and his audience a wedding guest" (Warren 43).
- "What he tells the wedding guest is that the human love, which the guest presumably takes to be an occasion for merriment, must be understood in the context of universal love and that only in such context may it achieve its meaning" (43).
- "So we have here a peculiar and paradoxical situation: the poem is a poem in which the poetic imagination appears in a regenerative and healing capacity, but in the end the hero, who has, presumably, been healed, appears in one of his guises as the poète maudit [cursed poet]. So we learn that the imagination does not only bless, for even as it blesses it lays on a curse" (44).

From: Lawrence Lipking, "The Marginal Gloss." *Critical Inquiry* 3.4 (Summer 1977), 609-655.

- "Marginalia--traces left in a book--are wayward in their very nature; they spring up spontaneously around a text unaware of their presence....The marginal gloss, however, responds to another frame of mind: the need to spell everything out....frequently serves to affirm the relation of the part to the whole" (Lipking 612).
- "The need of relating part to whole, in all probability, was the issue that motivated the most famous marginal gloss in English. From the very beginning, the parts of 'The Ancient Mariner' appeared to Coleridge as something given.... But from the first it was never clear to readers that the pieces of the ballad held together" (613).
- In 1817, "For the first time the strange and seemingly arbitrary happenings of the ballad were interpreted by a civilized scholastic voice: a marginal gloss....The gloss casts an entirely new light--a kind of secondary imagination over the poem" (614). *Rime* Lines 1-4 & gloss.
- "The gloss familiarizes every supernatural event; it assures us,...that the mariner is alive, sustained by a world of facts" (615). See Lines 131-38 & gloss, lines 195-98 & gloss.

Anne Williams. "An I for an Eye: 'Spectral Persecution' in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." PMLA 108.5 (October 1993), 591-604.

- "The gloss thus functions dramatically as a chorus, ensuring the mood and point of view of the spectator in accordance with the 'pious' and 'sanguine' editor's character" (Williams 591).
- "Through what is essentially a four-fold perspective, the poet achieves a refraction and humanization of impossible events:
 - "the personality of the Mariner reporting;
 - "the reactions of the Wedding-Guest who listens;
 - "the moralizing of the pious antiquarian editor who comments;
 - "by implication, the minstrel-balladeer."
- "By following this plan the poet lent credibility to what was becoming an obsolete vehicle, the Gothic tale of terror...."

Features of Gothic

- Mystery and suspense. (Rime epigraph from Thomas Burnet)
- Omens, portents, dream visions. (lines 63-70)
- High emotion, sentimentalism, but also pronounced anger, surprise, and especially terror. (lines 79-82)
- Supernatural events (e.g. a giant, a sighing portrait, ghosts or their apparent presence, a skeleton). (lines 153-76)
- The metonymy (part for the whole) of gloom and horror (wind, rain, doors grating on rusty hinges, howls in the distance, distant sighs, footsteps approaching, lights in abandoned rooms, gusts of wind blowing out lights or blowing suddenly, characters trapped in rooms or imprisoned).
- The vocabulary of the gothic (use of words indicating fear, mystery, etc.: apparition, devil, ghost, haunted, terror, fright).
- Sex and Death: Fainting, frightened, screaming, near-naked women. Women threatened by powerful, impetuous male. (lines 181-94)
 - La Femme / l'homme fatale: deadly woman / man
- Ancient prophecy, especially mysterious, obscure, or hard to understand.
- Ancient spaces and places: castles, etc.

More Anne Williams

- "But before we meet the Mariner himself we are introduced to him by the Minstrel-Poet and the Wedding-Guest" (592). *Rime* lines 1-13
- "These three descriptive terms [ancient man, glittering-eyed / bright-eyed, Mariner] are the only ones provided by the Minstrel in Part I."
 - "But he does briefly comment on the intense magnetic power of the Mariner." *Rime* lines 14-32
- "We do not hear from [the Minstrel] again until the end of Part VII." Lines 618-625
- "Such is the framework within which the Mariner is left to reveal himself: a minimum of description and a comment on the effect of his narration on his spellbound auditor."

James D. Boulger. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner--An Introduction" *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. 1-20. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1969.

Two major themes: "the creation of a sacramental universe by means of creative imagination and the operation within that universe of the religious pattern of Fall and Redemption" (Boulger 8).

"We may not assume that the cluster of moon symbols consistently represents the workings of imagination, or the sun symbols the discursive reason...and a form of alienation, but only that Imagination and understanding are present in the poem in various ways" (9).

"The main body of the poem, then, despite some residue of logic and sense realism of our ordinary kind, is a world of 'pure imagination' and will have the logic of a Dream, in so far as we can understand such logic" (10).

The voyage takes place in the world of imagination; “four aspects are noticeable, as evidence...” (Boulger 12).

- “The ‘dream’ quality of the voyage and all its events, with the participation of reality, living and nonliving in one organic whole, and the unending series of shifts between subjects and objects, sights and sounds, in the phenomena of the perceived world;
- “a special kind of logic, or ‘non-logic’ if you will, in the main events and symbols of the poem;
- “a machinery of ‘spirits’ of various orders not found in the ordinary world; [The Storm-Blast, the Polar-Spirit, Nightmare Life-in-Death, and the ‘troop of spirits blest’]
- “a special definition of appearance and reality, substance and surface, developed in the descriptions of objects, especially the sea, during the voyage.”

“...the world of the poem is quite different from the land world” (Boulger 12).

“For a short while, the two worlds compete, with the orderly, rational world of conventional bride and wedding gaiety gradually giving way to the phantom ship, its sudden voyage, and the living sun and moon” (11).

“...some examples of the tension between imaginative process and worldly logic in the [poem’s] central section....

“the confused moral reasoning of the sailors... [lines 91-102]

“the conflict between the actual order of the land world and the imaginative dreamlike world of the voyage and the sea...”

Dreams personify all things, animate or inanimate, good or malevolent. (Lines 41-50, 55-62)

Confused quality of sounds (lines 354-66).

Tension between scientific logic & creative process...

“The Wedding Guest is a reasonable man, so he thinks; he wants reasons for things, but the Mariner has none to give...” (Boulger 11).

The Wedding Guest “wants to participate in a function of the actual order (the wedding), while the Mariner has only his dream to offer.”

“Coleridge constructs a series of cause-effect, if-then situations which mock the logic of common sense and custom” (14).

Dream logic: an Albatross can break up the ice (lines 63-70); if I kill this Albatross, my ship gets stranded by evil forces & 200 men die; if, under a random moon, I then bless water snakes, I will be forgiven the ‘crime’ (lines 279-291).

Dream logic explains the “machinery” in the poem.

“The dream-state acts as an existential parable for the proposition that our ‘real’ world is appearance, and the world of imagination and process [is] a spiritual reality” (18).

- “...the acceptance of the appearances of the visible world is an act of Faith, and only God is the supreme and unknowable Cause of the ‘sense manifold’ that we see and live in... was more congenial to Coleridge’s mind than... common sense, scientific rationalism, crude mythopoeia, or simple orthodoxy—the alternatives represented by the wedding guest, the sailors, the Spirits and the Hermit respectively” (16). [lines 393-429]
- “Before the Mariner can accept faith, repentance, and a true sense of the spiritual order behind phenomena or objects, he must be frightened out of the easy, vulgar, and commonplace assurance of the ‘reality’ of things.” [lines 230-262, 468-471]
- “He has learned something of the spectral nature of ordinary reality, and the fact that visual phenomena hide, not reveal ‘substance’” (17). [lines 484-491]

The Moral Order

- The Mariner's return "is a return to the ordinary world of sense realism and conventional order, and requires an adjustment of Imagination to Reason again, the reverse of the one required as we moved into the world of the poem" (18). [lines 496-513]
- "His redemption *has* taken place in the world of symbolic action, but does not have status on land."
- "In this poem it is the Mariner himself who is the living proof of a more serious and deeper moral order than ours..." (19).
- "The ending is supposed to leave the author, reader, and Wedding Guest believing that the Mariner's voyage was a real one into the seas of the Imagination...."