

The Conflicting World
of
“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

by

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Probably one of the most influential modern criticisms of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (in the following abbreviated as “The Rime”) is Robert Penn Warren’s essay, “A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading.”¹ In this essay Warren shows a symbolic interpretation of the poem with an emphasis on a “sacramental vision” or the “one Life.” His essay is so elaborate and thorough that it seems to have defined to some extent a way of interpreting the poem; but as other critics have shown, Warren’s interpretation is not infallible.

One of the critics who stand against Warren’s criticism is Edward E. Bostetter, whose essay, “The Nightmare World of ‘The Ancient Mariner,’” squarely challenges Warren’s “sacramental vision.”² Bostetter argues that in seeking a unity Warren “superimposes upon the poem a rigid and consistent pattern of meaning” and distorts the facts of the poem by ignoring some key episodes.³ What is striking about Bostetter’s argument is that because the meaning of the universe and the fate of man entirely depend on chance (as evident, he says, in the scene of dice game by spectre-women), any attempt of systematic, philosophical, or religious interpretation of the poem is

ineffectual. Bostetter's essay is very convincingly written; but, as it attempts to attack Warren's criticism, it seems to push its points too far. In this study, therefore, I will examine particularly Bostetter's interpretation along with Warren's and attempt to give another way of interpreting the poem.

In regard to Warren's "sacramental vision," Bostetter says that there are irrational and capricious elements in the poem and "the powers of the universe are presented as authoritarian and punitive."⁴ The punishment of the Mariner and his shipmates is very severe and sustained, and naturally a question arises about the nature of the universe (or God) which punishes men very harsh just for killing an albatross. The most disturbing element that Bostetter perceives is the "caprice" of this kind of universe. Treating the episode of the dice game as the major evidence of this caprice, he says that it "makes chance the decisive factor" in the Mariner's and shipmates' punishment and "it throws into question the moral and intellectual responsibilities of the rulers of the universe."⁵ Furthermore, he adds that in view of man's fate decided by the throw of the dice, the moral conception of the universe appears "primitive and savage—utterly arbitrary in its ruthlessness."⁶

Bostetter is right in pointing out the capriciousness of the dice game, but here he seems to be pushing his interpretation too far by identifying the capriciousness with the nature of the universe. Probably this happens because he fails to see how the dice game takes place.

In Part III of "The Rime," after continuous thirst and anguish, the Mariner sees a sail, then bites his arm to suck the blood and cries in joy; but his joy soon lapses into horror, for the sail turns out to be a ghost ship. The ship comes between the Mariner's ship and the sun:

And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,
(Heaven's Mother send us grace!)

The Conflicting World of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Koguchi)

As if through a dungeon-grate he peered
With broad and burning face.

Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud)
How fast she nears and nears!
Are those *her* sails that glance in the Sun,
Like restless gossameres?

Are those *her* ribs through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate?
And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
Is DEATH that woman's mate?

The image of a "dungeon" pervades here, and what is important about the scene is that the Mariner is almost shut off (or he feels so) from the sun. Throughout the poem the sun and the moon play very important roles. Warren explains that under the sun something ominous and ill occurs and under the moon something good does; but Bostetter, using yet critically the criticism of J. B. Beer and Elliot B. Gose, Jr., refutes Warren's interpretation of the moon-sun imagery.⁷ These critics show, Bostetter says, that not necessarily ascribing a negative meaning to the sun, Coleridge often "used the sun in its traditional identification with God" and such an identification is apparently seen in "The Rime."⁸ (Bostetter supports their interpretation, but he disagrees with them when they are content with Warren's interpretation of the "sacramental vision"; he does not accept Warren's moral or theological interpretation of the poem when the nature of the universe appears to him frivolous.) Part II of the poem undoubtedly shows the Mariner's (or Coleridge's) identification of the sun with God: "Nor dim nor red, like God's own head, / The glorious Sun uprist."

Back to the "dungeon" image above: one may interpret, therefore, that the Mariner's estrangement from the sun means his

alienation from God. But one should be careful about this interpretation, because the Mariner's alienation is not complete. "As if through a dungeon-grate" the sun peers "with broad and burning face," and this peering of the sun, repeated again in the second stanza after, suggests God's observation of the fate of the Mariner and the crew. What is more, the ominous dice game of spectre-women takes place while the sun still shines: "'The game is done! I've won! I've won! / Quoth she [Life-in-Death], and whistles thrice. / The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out"

Bostetter bases his refutation of Warren's "sacramental vision" on the caprice of the universe, but this is a narrow view. Because, as seen above, God appears to supervise man's fate even at the nadir of his suffering. The life and death of the Mariner and the crew are decided with the observation, though almost subtle, of God.

The universe of "The Rime" is also different from the "One Life" that Warren sees. Rather it is a supernatural world where demonic and angelic powers interact under the omniscient will of God. As Bostetter points out, the God of the poem may be "a jealous God" or a wrathful God,⁹ but this critic seems to define the nature of God by stressing the capriciousness of the universe, which more or less derives from ungodly, demonic powers as represented in the poem.

Then, what is the true nature of God manifested in the poem? An analogy between the Mariner and Job may be useful in clarifying the cosmology of "The Rime." The fate of both men is similar in terms of their extreme sufferings and acknowledgment of God's love. In the case of Job, he is stripped of everything but his life; God permits the Devil to test Job's endurance and belief in Him. First, because of excessive torture Job succumbs to the Devil's temptation, yet eventually he repents and ties his belief and trust in the mercy of God.

Likewise, the Mariner is deprived of everything; indeed, all the crew die, and the ship he boards sinks finally. He goes through a

series of agonies—physically and mentally; and what is left to him is ultimately his perennial condition of "Life-in-Death," with a curse to repeat his incredible story to whoever must listen, and preach the gospel of God's love. The experiences of Job and the Mariner are different in detail; but, on the whole, they are similar enough to say that the God of "The Rime" and the One of Job are kindred—they appear indifferent to men yet look after them directly or indirectly.

Like the God of Job, the God of "The Rime" puts the Mariner in the hand of demonic spirits, and He peers. Indeed, in the poem there are no instances to show that the God Himself is capricious: His will is subtle and almost invisible. It seems too farfetched to interpret the nature of God by the arbitrariness of an evil world.

Why is it, then, that all the crew die and the only survivor is the Mariner who actually incurs calamity by killing an albatross? Is the albatross more important than many men? Bostetter raises a question:

The men are guilty of no more than the usual human frailty. True, by acquiescing they become accomplices but there is a vast difference in degree if not in kind between passive ignorant acquiescence and the Mariner's violent act. And what of the rulers of the universe? They are revealed as holding the same contempt for human life that the Mariner held for bird's life, by finding the crew equally guilty and deserving of the same punishment as the Mariner.¹⁰

What is necessary here is to examine the qualities of the Mariner's and the crew's sin. Obviously, Bostetter considers the Mariner's sin graver than the crew's. But is it so?

In the Mariner's killing of the albatross, there is no clear sense of active motive—almost innocently he kills; but his killing itself, as Warren sees, is an act of pride. It is a very significant event, because it means the rejection of baptism. The Mariner rejects "a Christian soul" as symbolized by the albatross, and consequently he must undergo the force of an evil world. Likewise, the crew commit the same

sin when they justify the Mariner's killing and become "accomplices in the crime." The Mariner's sin remains at this level, but the crew's sin deepens. As soon as the ship is stuck on the sea and ill omen and suffering begin to fall on them, they blame the Mariner with "evil looks" and hang the dead albatross round his neck. They impose the whole responsibility for their sufferings on the Mariner and make him the sign of curse. What is more, they continue to torment him with their horrible eyes even after their deaths:

An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man's eye! (Part IV)

Is there not a soul who prays with the Mariner for forgiveness? None of the crew shows mercy or forgiveness to him. Is this what Bostetter means by "the usual human frailty" of the crew? In their attitudes there is little sincere awareness of God. Unlike Jonah's crew in the Old Testament, who sympathize with him yet fear God, they just continue to curse the Mariner. Indeed, "The Rime" shows God's judgment on them. When they die, their spirits make for hell or heaven: "They fled to bliss or woe."

The man who is nearest to penance is, in fact, the Mariner; and he eventually gets the mercy of heaven. The greatest sinner often reaches the deepest truth of God. Bostetter says that "the Mariner's act may have been a sin, but it made him important to God and men alike; in this sense he was rewarded rather than punished,"¹¹ but this critic does not see the relationship of the Mariner's penance and God's mercy. He interprets the Mariner's reward from his last, cursed condition: he says, "... he [the Mariner] himself is given super-human powers. He passes like night from land to land; he has strange powers of speech; he is apparently immortal."¹²

The fundamental point of "The Rime" is that the universe of the poem fuses natural and supernatural phenomena, and symbolically

the universe shows the enigmatic presence of both Godless and God-omnipotent worlds. Bostetter says that "what he [Coleridge] feared was a universe in which he was at the mercy of arbitrary and unpredictable forces. 'The Rime' envisions such a universe."¹³ This statement is half correct; but, seeing the nature of the universe (or God) as caprice, Bostetter does not perceive an ultimate paradox in "The Rime" —the paradoxical conflict between Godless and God-omnipotent worlds. "The Rime" reveals not only the capricious and evil force but also the benevolent nature of the universe. Fundamentally, the conflict creates the thematic tension of the poem. In the conflict of both worlds man's fate is decided and ultimately resolved in the merciful will of Providence.

"The Rime" shows a mystical world of evil and good, a world of conflict which is vivid with many colors and seems real. The creation of pseudo-reality in poetic imagination, which, according to Coleridge, generates the "willing suspension of disbelief," influences man's emotions and thought.¹⁴ Man's participation in an imaginative world, as Coleridge implies, is to see the truth of the universe beyond the barrier of ordinary reality. As Patricia M. Adair says, Coleridge was always trying to "bridge the gulf . . . Between the material and spiritual, mechanical and transcendental, explanation of the universe," and ultimately his attempt was to "see God, or at least a living spirit, immanent in the natural world."¹⁵

But as Coleridge delves further into the spiritual world of imagination, he perceives the presence of evil. Like Milton's cosmology in his *Paradise Lost*, in the universe Coleridge sees the coexistence of demonic and godly powers, and this coexistence inevitably brings him to a fundamental question about the nature of the universe. As his longing for the harmony of the wholeness or One Life of the universe expressed, for instance, in "The Eolian Harp" shows, Coleridge has searched for the ultimate, universal state of love in the unity of man and God. But evil exists as if to break the unity. The evil is active, not simply meaning the lack of good. In Part II of "The Rime" some

men dream and disclose the truth of their adversity caused by a revengeful spirit who has followed their ship from the South-Pole:

And some in dreams assured were
Of the Spirit that plagued us so;
Nine fathom deep he had followed us
From the land of mist and snow.

Symbolically, the spirit seems to stand for Coleridge's ambivalent feelings toward the mysterious nature of the universe; in other words, it is a demon threatening Coleridge's consciousness of the supreme harmony of One Life.

How is the Mariner redeemed in "The Rime"? In Part IV the Mariner goes through extreme loneliness, curse, penance, and partial redemption. Seeing the beauty and happiness of sea-snakes, he blesses them in his heart: "A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessed them unaware." Here he transcends the hate and contempt which he had toward the "slimy things" of the sea. His unconscious blessing is spontaneous, and he succeeds in shifting his self-pity into pity, sympathy, and love. He learns that love lifts a curse upon him and defeats evil. This is the message he acquires in his extraordinary experience. Going through the world of demonic and angelic powers, he acknowledges the certainty of spirits, God, and love; hence, at the last scene he says to a wedding-guest:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (Part VII)

Indeed, the certainty of a spiritual world and the vision of the higher state of love expressed in the Mariner's obsessed talk move the wedding-guest's mind; and the guest becomes "a sadder and a wiser man," recognizing the difference between the union (marriage) of earthly love and the more difficult union of God's love with man.

In "The Rime" the blend of natural and supernatural worlds is so well balanced that the poem generates a sort of trance. Coleridge's poetic imagination creates a dramatic cosmos ranging from the sea to heaven. It flies into an irrational and mysterious world and describes invisible things as vivid and real. Hamlet says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy"; Coleridge's "The Rime" fuses things in heaven and earth to create a world, detached yet somehow mysteriously real.

In sum, the world of "The Rime" evinces neither the "sacramental vision" of the One Life as Warren suggests nor the nightmarish and capricious nature of the universe (or God) as Bostetter asserts. The poem shows a Godless and God-omnipotent world, where evil and good interact and the Providential Will manifests itself with the severity of punishment and love. In a Miltonic sense, the Mariner goes through the world of evil to know the presence of good and love.

Coleridge's imagination probes into the domain of a spiritual world and grapples with what is hidden there, and the dramatic expression of his discovery shows a mysterious yet brilliant world of imagination, which is "The Rime."

Notes

1 Robert Penn Warren, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading," *Collected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1946).

2 Edward E. Bostetter, "The Nightmare World of 'The Ancient Mariner,'" *Coleridge: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

3 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

7 J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Oxford UP, 1959); E. B. Gose, Jr., "Coleridge and the Luminous Gloom," *PMLA* LXXV (June 1960) 238-44.

8 Bostetter, p. 66.

9 Ibid., p. 71.

10 Ibid., p. 69.

11 Ibid., p. 74.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 75.

14 In *Biographia Literaria* (II, 5-6), Coleridge says 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."

15 Patricia M. Adair, *The Waking Dream: A Study of Coleridge's Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1967), p. 7.