SEL 24 (1984)
ISSN 0039-3657

Guilt and Death: The Predicament of *The Ancient Mariner*

DAVID S. MIALL

Faced with an experience as profoundly strange as that offered in *The Ancient Mariner*, we become anxious to locate it in some existing system of knowledge. What the poem means may be assimilated to our understanding of Christian redemptive processes, or to that vision of the One Life which Coleridge celebrated elsewhere, or to the trials of the poetic imagination itself.[1] It has also been clear to many readers, beginning with Coleridge himself (according to certain hints in his notebooks), that the poem clairvoyantly rehearses predicaments central to Coleridge's subsequent life[2]—his guilt, his isolation, the loss of love, the experience of opium addiction. Since Coleridge was preoccupied at various times with Christian redemption, the One Life, or the Imagination, the poem thus becomes readable both as a biographical and as a metaphysical document. The questions arising from the poem's strangeness are transferred elsewhere, away from the experience of the poem itself.

Discontent with such readings has been felt in the last few years.[3]

David Miall is a lecturer in English at The College of St. Paul & St. Mary, Cheltenham, England. He is working on a study of Coleridge's understanding of psychology, and has published papers in this area on dreams and love.

[1]Representative examples of such readings, respectively are: G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), pp. 84–88; Newton P. Stallknecht, *Strange Seas of Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1958), ch. 5; Robert Penn Warren, "A Poem of Pure Imagination," *KR* 8 (Summer 1946):391–427, rpt. in *Selected Essays* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), pp. 233–50.

[2]George Whalley, "The Mariner and the Albatross," in K. Coburn, ed., *Coleridge: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1967), pp. 32–50; Molly Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (London: Quartet Books, 1977).

[3]John Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 145–46; Edward E. Bostetter, "The Nightmare World of *The Ancient Mariner*," in *Coleridge: A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 65–77; Frances Ferguson, "Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *Georgia Review* 31 (Fall 1977):617–35; Raimonda Modiano, "Words and 'Languageless' Meanings: Limits of Expression in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *MLQ* 38 (March 1977):40–61; Jerome J. McGann, "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner," *Critl* 8 (Autumn 1981):35–67.

That the strangeness of *The Ancient Mariner* cannot, after all, be entirely resolved by such critical procedures, points to the existence of some resistant ambivalence central to the poem. While the poem's motivation, I shall suggest, is a largely unacknowledged and apparently motiveless guilt, the Mariner's subsequent encounter with death is so terrible that it imposes a psychic wound from which recovery can only ever be partial. It is from the conjunction of these two causes, guilt and the encounter with death, that the poem derives much of its power. The fact that neither is to be explained in terms of the other is a major cause of its profound and disturbing ambivalence. A preliminary view of that ambivalence can most readily be obtained by considering the poem's moral.

I. The Moral

The Mariner's final words to the Wedding Guest, "He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small," are manifestly inadequate as a summing up of what the voyage has taught him; the weight of the rest of the poem undermines it. Perhaps that was what Coleridge intended. If this is accepted, *The Ancient Mariner* answers to our new reluctance to admire literary works that seek to inculcate a moral. In this respect, as in so many others, we can say that Coleridge is merely ahead of his time in replying to Mrs. Barbauld's criticism of the poem for having no moral, that, on the contrary, the moral sentiment was an "obtrusion," and that it "ought to have had no more moral" than the tale of the Merchant and the Genie in the *Arabian Nights*.[4]

Yet the poem appears to be structured by the notions of wrongdoing, punishment, and penance. How are we to understand them? If a literary work contains moral concepts and yet offers no consistent moral meaning—and this seems to be the direction of Coleridge's remark in the *Table Talk*—that in itself is to make a moral statement about the nature of the universe. It is to declare that human experi-

---

McGann argues for the unity of the poem in terms of its promulgation of Coleridge's One Life, or Christian redemptive view, but insists that we view it with skepticism as historically conditioned. McGann underplays the history of the poem's development, however, and claims for the Coleridge of 1797–1798 a conscious purpose in writing the poem consistent with the Coleridge who produced the 1817 version. I argue a different view below.

[4]S. T. Coleridge, *The Table Talk and Omniana*, ed. T. Ashe (London: George Bell, 1909), p. 87. Arnold Davidson, in "The Concluding Moral in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *PQ* 60 (Winter 1981):87–94, would reinstate the moral as an expression of the Mariner's sin of rejection. It is directed to the Wedding Guest who is in danger of committing a similar sin. I argue in line with this below, but more specifically, that the Mariner's crime is a failure of love.

ence has no identifiable meaning, that the world as stage and the players upon it merely constitute a drama of the absurd. It is difficult to believe that Coleridge meant Mrs. Barbauld to understand him in such a radical sense. In fact, there is reason to think that Coleridge himself was at one time much more perplexed by the moral meaning of his poem than this remark suggests.

Perhaps a more productive way to restate the problem faced by readers of the poem is this: the poem raises questions about the *adequacy* of our moral categories for interpreting our place in the world. The mind of the Mariner struggles to make sense of his experience of the world with the moral concepts available to him: perhaps the significance of the poem lies in his failure to achieve more than a partial formulation of its moral meaning. It might be argued that in Christian terms the Mariner is a sinful soul in need of further penance, and that this need not preclude the Mariner's attainment of complete insight into the causes of his condition. But the Mariner's concluding statement, particularly his lines "the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all," seems too far removed from his experience to be persuasive, too abstract to encompass the depth and horror of that experience. Above all, it leaves the moral cause of such experience unilluminated. The Mariner's fate, destined to wander and to suffer the agony of periodic relivings of his experience, also indicates dramatically the incompleteness of this formulation. What God has made of the Mariner turns out to be something quite other than a work of love ("God himself / Scarce seemed there to be"); and the Mariner has not averted his exile's fate by seeking God's love in the kirk either, where he prays "With a goodly company."

Behind the moral concepts of the poem lies some other, more intractable experience which resists the moral reading, and which continues to exert an obscure but powerful influence on the reader. This experience must be characterized negatively, at this stage at least. It calls into question the optimism of Wordsworth, which Coleridge might be thought to have shared, when he claims "how exquisitely . . . / The external World is fitted to the Mind."[5] Such faith in the correspondence between man's thought and the world sustains us in many areas, notably our progress in the sciences. As Piaget has put it, for example, there is "steady agreement between physical reality and the mathematical theories employed in its description;" and he

[5]"Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, lines 66–68. As Patricia M. Adair noted, in *The Waking Dream: A Study of Coleridge's Poetry* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), Coleridge's treatment of nature in Part II of the poem "shows that he was quite aware of the danger of linking the natural with the moral world. It is a pantheistic error into which many of his critics have fallen" (p. 60).

refers to the "harmony between mathematics and physical reality."[6] We seem to require a similar correspondence in the moral sphere, between our equations of moral cause and effect and the experiences of reward and punishment imposed on us by the world. "It sometimes happens," said Coleridge, voicing this common feeling, "that we are punished for our faults by incidents, in the causation of which these faults had no share: and this I have always felt the severest punishment." The resulting pain, of which Coleridge speaks, confutes our sense of the innate justice of the world: "For there is always a consolatory feeling that accompanies the sense of a proportion between antecedents and consequents."[7] No such consolation is available in *The Ancient Mariner*. The Mariner's sufferings are greatly out of proportion in comparison with what seems a relatively trivial crime; the death of the rest of the crew is even more so. In the universe envisioned in the poem, as Edward Bostetter concluded, man is "at the mercy of arbitrary and unpredictable forces."[8]

Coleridge himself seems to have felt unhappy about the arbitrariness of the poem, since he sought to leach some of the strangeness out of subsequent editions.[9] The "Argument" prefixed to the poem was purely descriptive on its first appearance in 1798. In 1800 it became a moral argument about crime and judgment. In 1817 the marginal gloss was added, which tells the moral story of the Mariner in much more straightforward fashion than the poem itself. At the same time Coleridge added the epigraph from Thomas Burnet about a world of invisible spirits. While this augments the mystery of the poem's environment on the one hand, its positive central phrase suggests on the other hand that the spirits, too, are part of a morally ordered universe: "it is sometimes good to contemplate in the mind, as in a pic-

[6]Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. Chaninah Maschler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 40.

[7]*Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907), 2:207.

[8]"The Nightmare World of *The Ancient Mariner*," p. 75. To put it another way, the unified ideological meaning seen by McGann, in "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner," is undercut by some irreducible experiential dilemma; the latter is as ahistorical as such matters can be. My discussion of guilt and death below suggests how Coleridge transcended his historical conditions in writing at least these aspects of the poem.

[9]The following points about the Argument and Gloss were made by Ferguson, but I believe that she has misread Coleridge's intention regarding the Burnet epigraph. K. M. Wheeler's recent discussion of the poem in *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1981) shows in detail that the Gloss is narrower and more specific than the poem itself: it "streamlines" the narration and, like the 1800 Argument, shows a "tone of moral over-determination" (pp. 52, 50).

ture, the image of a greater and better world."[10] Thus, while Coleridge could not moderate the strangeness of the poem itself, he tried to show that it was ultimately comprehensible by surrounding the poem with an apparatus of moral statement and suggestion. Similarly, the 1800 version of the poem was entitled "A Poet's Reverie," as if to suggest that its arbitrariness lies in the poet's mind rather than in the world he alludes to. This maneuver may be compared to Coleridge's treatment of "Kubla Khan," prefaced by the long account of its genesis in an opium dream; here again Coleridge appears to have been attempting to ward off criticism of a poem's strangeness. Perhaps Coleridge's much discussed remark of 1830, recorded in the *Table Talk*, should be interpreted in this light: to say that it should have no moral, being a work of "pure imagination," seems to return it to the status of "A Poet's Reverie."

The Mariner's recourse to moral and religious sentiments during his tale seems necessary in order for him to communicate at all; but the disjunction between sentiment and actual experience is poignant. Raimonda Modiano has analyzed the disjunction in terms of the deficiencies of language itself. He points out that there is a language of direct, mainly sensory reference in the Mariner's narrative, and a language of orthodox reference that tends to construe the experience in familiar moral terms for the benefit of the Wedding Guest, particularly following the moments when the Wedding Guest intervenes with expressions of horror or fear. Thus the narrative is not an objective account of the Mariner's experiences, but one which is accommodated to its auditor. It is, says Modiano, "a later *version* of that voyage told by an old and lonely man who can neither explain nor fully describe what happened to him on a 'wide wide sea.'" "Having borrowed his terms of description from the Wedding Guest's world in order to make himself understood to his listener, the Mariner soon begins to confuse it with his own world, and in the end he identifies himself completely with the public values represented by his auditor."[11] Thus he explains the sounds of the spirits that re-animated the sailors in terms of skylarks, and the sails in terms of a brook in a woods, a series of comparisons far removed from the reality of an experience on an ocean devoid of birds or woodlands. A similar domestication of the Mariner's state is made through his later appeal to the kirk full of people, praying to the God who "made and loveth

[10]Translation in David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), p. 405.

[11]Modiano, pp. 41, 52. The point is also made by Sara Dyck, in "Perspective in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'," *SEL* 13 (Autumn 1973):603: the Mariner "has had some vital experience, the implication of which he can neither understand nor communicate in any other than the terms of conventional piety."

all." In this way the Mariner is distanced from his own experience; the retelling fails to resolve his sense of disturbance as a result, and must be attempted ever anew.

The history of Coleridge's treatment of the poem, adding Argument, Gloss, and Epigraph, suggests that he increasingly found himself in the position of the Wedding Guest in relation to the Mariner's tale; that he too, in Modiano's words, was obliged "to make sense of chance and irrationality in terms of accepted myths in order to maintain control over an experience that borders on madness." The experience makes the moral framework inadequate, then; but the experience cannot be wholly the product of chance and irrationality either, or it would lack its inherent power to disturb us. Even madness has its rationale, although one that subverts the accepted categories of response to the world. Perhaps the Mariner's narrative borders on madness in this respect: that the experience shows what subversion of the human state is possible at the limits of sanity. Such a fate is potentially open to all of us, hence the compound of fascination and disturbance which is aroused in readers of the poem.

That fate has a cause. While it is not explicable by means of the overt moral terms available in the poem, those terms offer a clue to the hidden rationale of the poem. The nature of the Mariner's subversion, the motives behind it, and something of Coleridge's motives for writing the poem can all be glimpsed behind the manifest content of the poem's moral structure. Here the deeper ambivalence of the conjunction of guilt and death comes into view. During the next two sections I have recourse to our knowledge about Coleridge's life and to modern psychiatric studies of trauma to explore these two aspects of the poem.

II. Guilt

The single most baffling feature of *The Ancient Mariner*, given the weight of suffering that follows, is that no cause is shown for the Mariner's shooting of the Albatross. The Argument of 1800 moralizes but does not give a motive: "how the Ancient Mariner cruelly and in contempt of the laws of hospitality killed a Sea-bird." All of the moral importance of the crime accrues in retrospect. Yet the Mariner himself, according to the arguments put forward above, is an unreliable narrator, and the other witnesses, the Mariner's shipmates, are equivocal over the meaning of the act. In itself the act seems relatively trivial in comparison with the dire consequences that ensue; it cannot, as an act, bear the moral weight that is put upon it.

In support of his Christian view of the poem, Robert Penn Warren saw the motiveless crime of the Mariner as symbolic of the Fall, and

congruent with Coleridge's adherence to the doctrine of Original Sin. The will of man is fundamentally corrupt, and in the Mariner's act we watch this corruption. "The lack of motivation, the perversity . . . is exactly the significant thing about the Mariner's act."[12] But this is to replace one mystery by another. The sense of guilt operative in the poem is too powerful to be dissolved in such a general metaphysical belief—one which modern readers moreover cannot be counted on to share. The guilt is reflected elsewhere in Coleridge's writings, and clearly has a personal source.[13] Warren argues rightly that we must "distinguish the themes inherent in the poem as such from the personal theme or themes which remain irrevocably tied to the man,"[14] but it may be possible to show that Coleridge's personal guilt touches us all. This would be not Original Sin, but a risk of the human condition.

In January 1805 Coleridge looked at his previous life and his immediate predicament (he was in Malta), in an attempt to explain the underlying motive of his sufferings. He wrote in his notebook: "It is a most instructive part of my Life the fact, that I have been always preyed on by some Dread, and perhaps all my faulty actions have been the consequence of some Dread or other on my mind / from fear of Pain, or Shame, not from prospect of Pleasure."[15] Most of the instances he went on to list, showing the effects of dread, were concerned with sex or love. He mentioned his strange love for Mary Evans, his marriage, and now his fears over Sara Hutchinson. That, as he added, "the least languor expressed in a letter from S. H. drives me wild," suggests that in his dread what he most feared was a judgment against him; thus, and only thus, would he be subject to "Pain, or Shame." All his procrastinations were a way of warding off the judgments of those whose love he relied on—judgments which were already persecuting him nightly in the self-judgments of the terrible dreams he mentions in the same note.

And yet the note, despite its searching analysis, failed to give a motive for the dread, even though it looked back to childhood. Although manifestly haunted by guilt in expectation of the pain of finding judgment against him, Coleridge could not explain the origin of the guilt which possessed him. *Dread* is indeed the appropriate term

[12]Warren, *Selected Essays*, p. 227.

[13]D. W. Harding noticed this—"The essence of the poem is a private sense of guilt, intense out of all proportion to public rational standards" ("The Theme of 'The Ancient Mariner'," in *Experience into Words* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 59)—but declined to resort to biographical speculation to explain it.

[14]Warren, p. 215.

[15]*Notebooks*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 3 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957-1973), 2:2398.

for such a generalized and motiveless sense of guilt. The repressed cause of Coleridge's dread is to be found in his childhood; by the evidence of the note, it is some previous failure of love in which judgment went against him.

Other commentators who have looked at Coleridge's childhood for a clue to the motiveless crime of the Mariner have claimed to find the cause in Coleridge's relationship with his mother. The psychoanalyst David Beres pointed to Mrs. Coleridge's coldness of character and attributed to Coleridge an unconscious complex of love and hate towards her, with resultant guilt. This reading was accepted by Norman Fruman, and versions of the same theory have been offered by Douglas Angus and, most recently, Thomas McFarland.[16] In this view, the Albatross, the figure of Life-in-Death, and the Moon all do duty as symbols of the ambivalent mother image. The theory is suggestive, but suffers from a degree of generality which reduces its explanatory power for an incident as powerfully disturbing as shooting the Albatross. In any case, such critics of Coleridge's upbringing have been looking in the wrong place for a cause. The missing motive lies in the death of his father when Coleridge was eight years old.

By his own account, Coleridge's relationship to his father was a much closer and warmer one than that with his mother. It is a remarkable fact, therefore, that his letter of reminiscence to Poole, describing his father's death three weeks before his ninth birthday, has nothing to say of his grief at such a disturbing event.[17] If he remembered his grief (as he was able to recall other disturbing events of his early childhood), he would surely have mentioned it. The implication arises that Coleridge's memory of his grief was repressed. There are two further reasons for believing this: first, the death was directly

[16]David Beres, "A Dream, a Vision, and a Poem: A Psycho-Analytic Study of the Origins of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 32 (1951):97-116; Norman Fruman, *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (New York: George Braziller, 1971), pp. 405-406; Douglas Angus, "The Theme of Love and Guilt in Coleridge's Three Major Poems," *JEGP* 59 (October 1960):655-68; Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 116-19. A useful critical review of the psychoanalytic literature on the poem is made by Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., in "'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Freudian Dream Theory," *PLL* 18 (Winter 1982):17-35.

[17]*Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956-1971), 1:352-55. An interesting psychoanalytic reading by Leon Waldoff, "The Quest for Father and Identity in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'," *Psychoanalytic Review* 58 (1971-1972):439-53, attributes the meaning of the poem to the absent Father, seeing the Oedipus complex behind the account of the Mariner's journey. My discussion is dependent less on psychoanalytic theory of this kind than on empirical clinical research, which in this instance seems to offer more fruitful lines of inquiry.

responsible for the removal of Coleridge a few months later to Christ's Hospital School in London, a fate which profoundly disturbed him, as a series of later poems up to "Frost at Midnight" bore witness. Such an exile must have seemed to the young Coleridge a judgment on him for the loss of his father, but this is not what the poems lament; rather they address the misery, loneliness, and confusion of finding himself transplanted from his home village. Second, psychiatric studies of childhood bereavement suggest that at eight years old Coleridge would have been most vulnerable to such a loss, and most likely to repress his response to it.

A large sample of a normal population were studied by Hilgard, Newman, and Fish for the effects of such bereavements: 21 percent of the sample were found to have lost a parent in childhood. In considering the type of memory of the event retained by the adult, the age of nine was shown to be crucial. When the death was experienced at or below the age of nine, grief was recalled only in rare cases. Grief of the surviving parent might be recalled, but only from the age of nine and upwards was one's own grief likely to be remembered.[18] C. W. Wahl suggests why the memory is repressed. Frustration of the developing child by the parent is met by "a reversal wish of the frustrating act," in which the parent would be banished. "Early in his life these wishes become equated with 'death wishes' towards frustrating objects." But at the infantile stage of thinking, such thoughts are felt both as effective and as invoking a similar punishment on the self, given the appropriate circumstances: the Law of Talion. Hence if a parent is lost by death or separation, this is perceived by the child as proof

> that his thoughts have magical power which can kill and destroy. The individual, therefore, lives in expectation that the same Talion punishment will be visited upon him by a malignant or wrathful divinity or fate. In addition, the child conceives of parental death or separation as a deliberate abandonment of him by the absent parents, a hostile act on their part for which he is, again, responsible, and for which he will have to pay. . . . Causation is personified and the child feels guilt subsequent to a death, as though he were the secret slayer.[19]

[18]Josephine R. Hilgard, Martha F. Newman, and Fern Fisk, "Strength of Adult Ego following Childhood Bereavement," in Robert Fulton, ed., *Death and Identity* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), p. 259.

[19]C. W. Wahl, "The Fear of Death," in Herman Feifel, ed., *The Meaning of Death* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), pp. 23-25.

The years from six to nine are the most dangerous for bereavement. Prior to six, as Maria Nagy showed,[20] children lack any realistic concept of death. Death is assimilated to sleep or rebirth, and death elicits puzzlement or, at worst, separation anxiety. The death concept only emerges, according to Sylvia Anthony, after "the child's powers of effective action have greatly reduced the tendency to *efficacy-thinking*" (that is, infantile omnipotence of thought). But from six to nine, with a primitive concept of death, anxiety at bereavement arises "on a basis of regression, which itself is a normal temporary reaction to experiences demanding personal readjustment, such as the death of a member of the family."[21] Thus the child of Coleridge's age when his father died suffers the worst consequences: he possesses both a concept of death as such, and at the same time he is liable to regress to an earlier stage of infant thought in which his hostility to the parent caused the death, an act for which he will receive equivalent punishment. Coleridge's exile to Christ's Hospital was the first stage of punishment for his inadequate love for his father; it was a punishment which was to be lifelong.

Coleridge's grief at his father's death was thus likely to have been attended by a dread so powerful that all memory of grief was repressed. But the dread was invoked on every other occasion in Coleridge's life involving the demands of love, including his love for Sara Hutchinson (who eventually fled from Coleridge's anxieties and paranoia). And the dread was, most notably, attached to the symbol of the Albatross when Coleridge came to write his poem. As the dread had no cause in Coleridge's conscious understanding, no motive could be assigned to the shooting of the Albatross; it is an act fraught with the most terrible consequences, but lacking any adequate rationale. That it involves some horrifying compulsion is suggested by the Wedding Guest's response at this point in the verse:

> "God save thee, ancient Mariner!
> From the fiends, that plague thee thus! —
> Why look'st thou so?" —With my cross bow
> I shot the Albatross.

[20]Maria H. Nagy, "The Child's View of Death," in Feifel.

[21]Sylvia Anthony, *The Discovery of Death in Childhood and After* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 138. John Bowlby argues that guilt in the bereaved child is due not so much to the child's hostile wishes as to the way the family treats the child. See *Attachment and Loss*, 3 vols., vol. 3: *Sadness and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), pp. 288–94, 364–65. Bowlby also argues that the concept of death can be acquired earlier than Nagy or Anthony suppose (pp. 273–74); but the cultural and family contexts described by Nagy and Anthony seem closer to Coleridge's experience than the studies drawn on by Bowlby.

Coleridge's guilt alighted on such causes as presented themselves. The story of the Albatross seems to have acted like a lightning conductor, locating the guilt on an exterior symbol and temporarily freeing Coleridge for his major feat of creative energy. As Freud noticed, speaking of criminals in the context of the power of the super-ego (which is largely unconscious), a crime may be the result of guilt rather than its cause. "It is as if it was a relief to be able to fasten this unconscious sense of guilt on to something real and immediate."[22]

While the consequences of the Mariner's shooting remain to be worked out, the type of consequence can already be anticipated by reference to the act's hidden motive. It will constitute a version of that omnipotence of thought with which Coleridge would have responded to the experience of his father's death, a view of the vengeful powers that exact punishment for such transgressions as losing a father. And here the poem speaks to the superstitious fear in all of us that Mind is not merely unfitted to the external world, but able to call up willy nilly all its nightmare, alien powers. Just as the child is totally dependent on the parent, so the sailor of Coleridge's day was totally dependent on the powers about him; both are likely to respond to challenge in a similar way. An interesting note of Coleridge's on superstition, written on the voyage to Malta in 1804, shows what lies behind the Mariner's predicament: he refers to "that mood of Thought & Feeling which arises out of the having placed our summum bonum (what we think so, I mean) in an absolute Dependence on Powers & Events, over which we have no Controll."[23] Coleridge himself was not as rational about the existence of such external powers as his note would imply. Did he subscribe to the animism of the Burnet epigraph or not? There is evidence in Coleridge's accounts of his dreams that he suspected his nightmares of originating in some alien power that impressed itself on him against his will.[24]

The phrase "omnipotence of thoughts" was coined by Freud. He was able to show how superstitions and fears of the uncanny are to be ascribed to the survival in us of this stage of thought: "none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves."[25] Parental disci-

[22] *The Ego and the Id*, in *Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey, 22 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 19:52.

[23] *Notebooks*, 2:2060.

[24] E.g. *Notebooks*, 2:2468. I discuss the question at more length in "The Meaning of Dreams: Coleridge's Ambivalence," *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (Spring 1982):57-71.

[25] "The Uncanny," in *Standard Edition*, 17:240. Freud's point is related to his central claim that earlier stages of thought always possess the potential for reinstatement: "the primitive mind is, in the fullest meaning of the word, imperishable." "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," *Standard Edition*, 14:286.

pline may reinforce our natural childhood animism by suggesting the existence of a higher power, against which the parent is seen to act as a kind of buffer. As Sylvia Anthony has shown in her case history of Bernard (aged eight when his father died), the sense of guilt at the parent's death "is therefore made more alarming by the sense of exposure to the direct action of a remote and severe authority from which the parent had sought to protect him."[26] So with the removal of the Albatross by the Mariner: all the forces of the universe seem to be invoked in the sequel to punish his act; sea and air are full of inimical spirits. Having projected his (unconscious) death wish onto the Albatross in his apparently arbitrary act, the environment of the Mariner becomes deadly; all that emerges from it in the sequel is hostile.

In keeping with the profound ambivalence of the poem, however, there are two principal agents of vengeance. First is the Polar Spirit, who is said to seek revenge for the death of the bird he loved; second is the figure of Life-in-Death, and she is much more deadly. If the guilt over the shooting speaks to the remnants in us of what is primitive and animistic, a regressive childhood fear, this second threat posed by Coleridge's poem assaults us in the center of our adult sense of ourselves. The Mariner's response to the death of his shipmates, his resultant isolation and becalming, together with his eventual fate as a wanderer, all effectively symbolize a predicament that potentially awaits us too.

That the poem contains two centers of disturbance, as it were, helps to explain how certain of the moral readings of the poem I referred to earlier came to be conceived. Given the lack of motivation for the shooting, and the relative triviality of the act, there is a tendency to transfer back on to it the weight and moral power of the later part of the poem. Several subsequent references to the shooting in the poem encourage this transfer. As a result, a weight of moral significance is bestowed on the shooting which the episode, considered on its own terms, cannot justify. Casting around for the source of such felt significance, the critic is forced to impose a pattern of Christian allegory on the shooting, or to see its resistance to explanation as a sign of Original Sin. As Frances Ferguson has noted, "the difficulty of the poem is that the possibility of learning from the Mariner's experience depends upon sorting that experience into a more linear and complete pattern than the poem ever agrees to do. For the poem seems almost as thorough a work of backwardness—or hysteron proteron—as we have."[27] Ferguson cites the archaic diction and ballad meter in support of this claim (backwardness of another kind, which helps to bring the poem

[26]Anthony, p. 102. Bernard was irrationally fearful of policemen and of God.
[27]Ferguson, p. 620.

nearer to the arbitrary and irrational level at which the more primitive thought processes operate). But the more important backwardness is the transfer of guilt at watching the death of two hundred shipmates on to the shooting. The lines about the deaths help to make the association: "every soul, it passed me by, / Like the whizz of my cross-bow!" But the nature of that guilt raises a different set of issues, which must be considered in their own right.

III. Death

The second most baffling aspect of *The Ancient Mariner*, but one which has by comparison received less comment, is that the fate of the Mariner is decided by the throw of dice. So too, it is implied, is the fate of the rest of the crew. It would be hard to conceive of a more effective symbol of arbitrariness than the throw of dice. Here there can be no resort to hidden meaning in order to give the Mariner's fate a moral construction: the symbol of the dice remains obdurately resistant to any moral reading. What it lacks in moral significance, however, is precisely what gives it its disturbing power in psychological terms. It is its very meaninglessness that explains the terrible predicament of the Mariner that follows. What is described in the remainder of the poem shows all the features of a major traumatic breakdown in the Mariner's personality, the proximate cause of which is his witnessing of the deaths of his two hundred shipmates.

Once again we are confronted with a species of hysteron proteron in which cause seems to follow effect, since in the sequence of the poem the effective symbol of the Mariner's state, the figure of Life-in-Death, appears before the state itself is fully manifested. But this arrangement possesses a kind of dream logic which fulfills two functions: first, it prepares the reader for the deeper significance of the scenes that are to follow (and I shall return to examine the figure of Life-in-Death to suggest where that significance lies), and second, it provides a bridge between the preliminary scene of becalming, into which the specter ship bursts, and the more deadly one to come, rather as the dream work, as Freud described it,[28] tends to unify and suggest connections between different parts of its material. But it is the death of his shipmates, not the encounter with Life-in-Death, which proves traumatic for the Mariner.

As the sailors die one after another, "Each turned his face with a ghastly pang, / And cursed me with his eye." The Mariner is left

[28]This is the aspect of dream work that Freud called "secondary revision." See *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Standard Edition*, 5:490.

alone, unable to pray, or even, it would seem, to move. But the worst aspect of his condition is the sight of the dead men about him.

> 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!
> Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
> And yet I could not die.

The Mariner is subject, in Robert Lifton's words, to "what may be called the survivor's 'death spell,' his thraldom to the death encounter itself."[29] Lifton's study of the victims of Hiroshima who survived exposure to the atom bomb (the significance of the title of his study, *Death in Life*, is inescapable for readers of Coleridge) describes traumatic experiences which in all essential details parallel Coleridge's account of the Mariner.

It is the sudden, unanticipated, and arbitrary event which has traumatic consequences. Modern life has multiplied the potential for such occasions, in the remote and mechanised devastation of warfare or the unexpected shock of a road accident. The survivors of Hiroshima suffered some of the worst and most enduring traumas that have been studied, a direct result of the scale of destruction at Hiroshima. Lifton points out that the whole of the city was inundated by death: at 1.2 miles from the center of the blast, for instance, if you were out of doors and survived, it has been estimated that eight out of ten people around you died.[30] The Mariner, in comparison, watches two hundred die, and is the only survivor. As with the survivor of Hiroshima, the Mariner is literally immersed in death.

Such an overwhelming encounter with death results in a psychic closing-off which is at the same time accompanied by a profound sense of guilt. To have been singled out for survival, by being stronger or luckier than others, is itself to be guilty. Such guilt "both interferes with, and is further stimulated by, psychic closing-off"—a double bind for the victim, which is to have enduring consequences. The survivor, says Lifton, "must look upon his motives and urges as evil—because he is part of a disaster which (whatever he did or did not do) defeated cooperative effort to limit its human toll, and because he

[29]Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: The Survivors of Hiroshima* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 508.
[30]Lifton, p. 28.

cannot accept either his urge to survive or the fact of his survival."[31] "Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding Guest!" says the Mariner, "This body dropt not down." That is his curse: that he survived while all the others died. His self-disgust is evident: "a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did I." His perceptions of the rotting sea and deck drive him in on himself, but his inner resources have closed off, he is unable to pray; moreover, "A wicked whisper came, and made / My heart as dry as dust." Is the Mariner aware for a moment that in some way he wished for the deaths of his shipmates, so that he might be spared?

The sight of the dead men presents the Mariner with a horror from which he cannot unfix himself. The memories of Lifton's subjects showed a similar election of one particular sight, in which their death guilt was symbolized: there would be some "specific image of the dead or dying with which the survivor strongly identifies himself, and which evokes in him particularly intense feelings of pity and self-condemnation." What "most moved me to pity," said one survivor at Hiroshima, who found himself in front of a destroyed school, "was that there was one dead child lying there and another who seemed to be crawling over him in order to run away, both of them burned to blackness."[32] Such a memory constitutes what Lifton calls the *ultimate horror* for that survivor. The Mariner is also subject to such a sight: "the dead were at my feet," he says,

> The cold sweat melted from their limbs,
> Nor rot nor reek did they:
> The look with which they looked on me
> Had never passed away.

For him it is that look, the curse in the eyes, which is his ultimate horror, symbolizing his death guilt. It is mentioned no less than four times in the poem.

The Mariner's immediate predicament lasts seven days. Its relation to the figure of Life-in-Death can now be made clearer. In a literal sense the Mariner's life is immersed in death, but there is a more profound meaning than this. His death guilt and imagery of horror are matched by the immovability of the ship, which has remained where it was since we were told that it stuck, "As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean." The Mariner himself is stuck in a psychic state from which no rescue is forthcoming. Life-in-Death is the appropriate symbol for this stasis. It is life that has petrified into the

[31]Lifton, pp. 42, 56.
[32]Lifton, pp. 56-57.

immovability of a dead thing, like the fly paralysed by the bite of the spider. Myth and folk-lore offer instructive parallels: the stare of the Gorgon or Medusa's head induces such a state, and the Sleeping Beauty remains as if dead until the awakening kiss.[33] The appearance of the specter ship as it crosses in front of the sun prefigures the meaning it will bring in this way for the Mariner:

> And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,
> (Heaven's Mother send us grace!)
> As if through a dungeon grate he peered
> With broad and burning face.

And yet, as this verse suggests, the state is not death, but a mimic of death, in which life is suspended—a more terrible state than death itself, since at least the souls of the Mariner's dead shipmates progress "to bliss or woe." Some indication of this is given in lines from the 1798 text of the poem describing Life-in-Death: paradoxically "she is far liker Death than he; / Her flesh makes the still air cold."

Behind the power of the curse in the dead men's eyes, therefore, the real ultimate horror is stasis. The proper condition of man's being is movement and progression. Coleridge's own sense of this may be seen in his account of thought, that "As by a billow we mean no more than a particular movement of the sea, so neither by a thought can we mean more than the mind thinking in some one direction."[34] But the Mariner's thoughts, like his ship, are stuck on a moveless sea, without billows or direction. The hopeless passivity of such a state was touched on in some of Coleridge's worst nightmares: a description he wrote on the voyage to Malta provides a remarkable gloss on the state of Life-in-Death. In his "Dreams of Despair,"

> the sense of individual Existence is full & lively only [for one] to feel oneself powerless, crushed *in* by every power—a stifled boding, one abject miserable Wretch / yet hopeless, yet struggling, removed from all touch of Life, deprived of all notion of Death / strange mixture of Fear and Despair—& that passio

[33]Perhaps also the vampire, whose "bite" projects its victim into a state of undead suspension in which no development is possible. Oddly enough, James B. Twitchell's discussion of *The Ancient Mariner* in *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (Durham, N. C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1981) does not notice this aspect of the poem.

[34]From the "Opus Maximum," Alice D. Snyder, ed., *Coleridge on Logic and Learning* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1929), p. 132.

purissima, that mere Passiveness with pain (the essence of which is perhaps Passivity).[35]

From this state of fixation the Mariner looks up to the moon, and here he sees an image of movement which will eventually unlock the frozen sources of his own progressiveness: "The moving Moon went up the sky, / And no where did abide." The gloss to this verse also speaks of "the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward." In blessing the water-snakes the Mariner is able to break out partially from the stasis of his death-immersion. The Mariner is then able to sleep, it rains, and the ship eventually moves on. But in the manner of its movement, and in the strange sights and sounds which fill the air, it is evident how incomplete is the Mariner's recovery; he is still isolated within the strange universe to which Life-in-Death condemned him, even if he is now moving towards home. His confused identification of the sounds he hears with skylark song, or the noise of a brook "In the leafy month of June," only renders more poignant the extent of his isolation by comparison with what he has lost.

It is after this degree of recovery, and after the spell of the curse in the eyes of the dead has finally been broken, that the most ominous verse of the whole poem is placed. "The curse is finally expiated," explains the gloss; yet some condition to which the stasis itself had betrayed him remains to be faced—unless, as the verse laconically suggests, it will be found to be unfaceable. I "looked far forth," says the Mariner, "yet little saw / Of what had else been seen";

> Like one, that on a lonesome road
> Doth walk in fear and dread,
> And having once turned round walks on,
> And turns no more his head;
> Because he knows, a frightful fiend
> Doth close behind him tread.

Whatever this verse means, it implies that the condition of stasis may be attended by some worse horror; no passage elsewhere in the poem either explains it or suggests that the Mariner was able to resolve the dread. This verse is the more disturbing for being placed so late in the story of the Mariner's recovery, and for seeming so arbitrary in relation to its context. Some light on the fiend's creation from the terrors

[35] *Notebooks*, 2:2078. R. C. Bald cited another dream of 1820 in connection with Life-in-Death, from the unpublished Notebook 23, p. 31: "Coleridge and *The Ancient Mariner*: Addenda to *The Road to Xanadu*," in Herbert Davis, W. C. DeVane, and R. C. Bald, eds., *Nineteenth Century Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1940), p. 34.

of stasis is available from another of Coleridge's notes. This is also concerned with despair, but this time its stasis is seen as the step before some horrifying implosion of the self: "reprobate Despair," he wrote in 1807, "snatches at the known Poison, that suspends—alas! to aggravate the Evil" (the reference is almost certainly to opium), which is "the pause that defers the blow to make it the more forceful."

> O who shall deliver me from the Body of this Death? Meanwhile the habit of inward Brooding daily makes it harder to confess the Thing, I am, to any one. . . . But the one ineradicable Idea, and unquenchable Yearning! — and the Fear, that Death itself will but increase it! for it seems to have an affinity with Despair![36]

Coleridge's "ineradicable Idea" in 1807 was his love for Sara. This helps to show us that the Mariner's trauma involves not only isolation and fixity, but also the judgment implicit in his death-guilt—he has failed in love. Coleridge's despairing note and the Mariner's fiend both seem to be saying that such failure is followed by the threat of psychic self-destruction.[37]

The Mariner's seven days of pure fixity are followed by a degree of progress which culminates in his return home. He attributes his release to "my kind saint," which enabled him to bless the water-snakes, and the journey back is said to be by virtue of a troop of spirits that animate the corpses of the dead sailors to work the ship. The Mariner is even the subject of a special conversation between two spirits in the air, in which he learns that his penance is not yet over. Such signs of favor in the Mariner's eyes—that he is the object of special attention—are analogous to the sense of providence felt by some of Lifton's survivors, although such grace or virtue in having been singled out for survival is a precarious feeling.[38] Lifton emphasises that the urgent need of the survivor, after the initial state of traumatic shock has passed, is to find some way of making sense of what has happened—what Lifton terms the attempt at formulation. The Mariner's explanation of his progress in terms of spirits is his attempt at

[36]*Notebooks*, 2:3078.

[37]In Freud's terms this is conceived as the rage of the super-ego against the ego, "a pure culture of the death instinct," which in a certain personality type (prone to a narcissistic choice of love object) is in danger of ending in suicide. See *The Ego and the Id*, *Standard Edition*, 19:53; "Mourning and Melancholia," *Standard Edition*, 14:252.

[38]Lifton, p. 61. Leslie Brisman, from a different perspective, sees the Mariner's appeal to his "kind saints" as a conceptualization that detracts from the truth of his condition: "Coleridge and the Supernatural," *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (Summer 1982):123-59.

formulation; so too is his final moral claim that "He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small."

But the depth of the traumatic experience leaves a residual death anxiety which ensures that formulation is unlikely to be complete. This is further indicated by the Mariner's recourse to the notion of spirits to promulgate his sense of connection with what had been a hostile universe. It is to regress to that infantile, animistic stage of thought. The death anxiety of the survivor, in Lifton's words, is "likely to have evoked—years after the bomb no less than at the moment it fell—those primitive layers of the mind which lend themselves to mythological thought."[39] Here the disturbing power of *The Ancient Mariner* can be restated: the Mariner's recourse to the world of spirits and of God represents a partial formulation of his experience. Precisely because it is primitive and inadequate, it is felt by the reader to leave the central episode of death and stasis unexplained and unjustified. The threat of stasis which lies beneath us all is left in suspension, operative and incurable.

The Mariner's lack of success in reaching a final formulation is shown by his fate. Even as he reaches the harbor he seems to carry the horror of death with him, to judge by the effect his mere appearance has on the Pilot and his boy: it is as if they sense the fiend that treads behind the Mariner. His request for shriving from the Hermit is not granted, but postponed as the Hermit requires him to say at once "What manner of man art thou?" There is no reference to the shriving being performed; it would seem that the telling of the tale postpones it indefinitely, each telling postponing it yet again. For, in psychological terms, what the Mariner is now subject to is traumatic repetition of his experience. As Lifton noted, the experience of the bomb was relived repeatedly in certain traumatic dreams of the survivors.[40] Freud also noticed the compulsion to repeat on the part of the victim of a trauma, which showed up in his dreams or in other types of obsessive behavior. Freud explained trauma itself as being "caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety, including lack of hypercathexis of the systems that would be the first to receive the stimulus." In the case of the repetitive dreams that ensue, the dreams represent an endeavor "to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis."[41]

This, then, is the final condition of the Mariner: unshriven, and

[39]Lifton, p. 119.

[40]Lifton, p. 136.

[41]"Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *Standard Edition*, 18:31–32. See also "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," *Standard Edition*, 20:166–67. Wheeler also notes Freud's account of the repetition syndrome, but without relating its appearance in the Mariner to his traumatic experience of death. See Wheeler, p. 178, n. 8.

doomed to relive his horrifying experience repeatedly. Coleridge describes the traumatic compulsion graphically:

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

The compulsion to repeat seems to rewrite the original stasis in different terms. As Freud went on to say, its manifestations "exhibit to a high degree an instinctual character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some 'daemonic' force at work." The Mariner certainly seems daemonic to the Pilot's boy—and perhaps to the Wedding Guest too. Freud spoke of the instinct in question as "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things."[42] Whether, as Freud would have us believe, the Mariner's final condition shows the workings of the death instinct is a question that must be left on one side for the moment.

IV. Conclusion

In my analysis of the poem I have identified two separate sources of disturbance, the guilt over the shooting and the experience of death and stasis. Such a reading might seem to imply that the poem is not a unified structure of meaning. Its unity, if it exists, is not secured by its moral structure, which is factitious, as I have tried to show; nor is it achieved by the transfer of significance from the death of the shipmates back on to the shooting. If there is a final impression of unity, it might be explained rather in the following way.

I claimed that the shooting of the Albatross acted as a focus for Coleridge's hidden childhood guilt, and for his fear of the vengeful, impersonal powers that lie beyond the protecting parent. There is no need to see the Albatross, in psycho-analytic fashion, as a symbol of the father: this would be reductive and, I believe, misleading. The Albatross offers a clue rather to what Coleridge lost as a child at his father's death, a symbol of his own protected state of innocence. That state is not without dangers—there is ice and fog—but the Albatross navigates them successfully and is set to work its way northwards towards fairer and more certain regions ("a good south wind sprung up behind"); it participates moreover in a regular ritual of food and prayer, the meaning of which it can hardly be expected to understand, but by which it is attracted. If this offers a metaphorical description of Coleridge's childhood, then the shooting of the Albatross represents

[42]"Beyond the Pleasure Principle," pp. 35–36.

perfectly the arbitrary horror, grief, and guilt which must have assailed Coleridge at the death of his father. It plunged him into a misery of isolation and dread, the origin of which was forever repressed in his memory. But the search for an explanation went on throughout Coleridge's life, and was to take the most productive forms in poetry and prose — work which for the most part transcended the urgent personal stimulus of its origins.

Similarly in *The Ancient Mariner*: the powers to which the Mariner is exposed do their worst, and leave him with a psychic wound from which complete recovery is impossible. But it is the arbitrariness of those powers which contains the key to the poem. It unites with our sense of the arbitrariness of the shooting of the Albatross, behind which lies the genuine and shocking arbitrariness of a father's death at the age of eight. In a just and ordered universe such things would not be permitted. In both cases shown in the poem, over both guilt and death, the human psyche is seen struggling to establish causes and to participate in responsibility for events. As Freud put it in regard to the anxiety of traumatic dreams, at least the system is *attempting* to resolve its problem, even if in such cases it fails to do so.[43] What we witness throughout the poem is a struggle for meaning. The Mariner's attempt, his agonised convulsions to tell the tale and master the experience is, so far as it goes, a failure; but it is a heroic failure. He has, after all, survived; and his trial stirs us to our roots since we too seek for meaning in an arbitrary world. His struggle is an epic one.

[43]"New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," *Standard Edition*, 22:29.