

A Coleridgean Covenant:
An Analysis of Samuel Coleridge's Poem
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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In his book, The Coleridge Companion, John Spencer Mill has conveniently collected and condensed themes of the many critical interpretations of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The interpretations are varied. "For some, it was a religious or ethical poem; for others, it was a psychological, even autobiographical study of guilt and terror; and for still others, it was concerned with philosophic, or aesthetic theory, or politics" (Hill 155). No matter which end of the spectrum we begin to interpret the poem, one thing is certain: among critics Coleridge's work cannot be pinned to one clear analysis.

Perhaps, this inability to pin down a strict interpretation of "the Rime" is a compliment to and an accomplishment of Coleridge's genius, especially when considering his theory of pure imagination and his theory of the "One Life." Perhaps no one interpretation can explain "the Rime" since each critical interpretation is only a part of the deeper reality of the poem. Each analysis is symbolic to the parts of the whole meaning of the poem, the "One Life." Charles Lamb, a contemporary of Coleridge's, said "that the poem is not about anything; it is a work of pure imagination to be experienced but not plundered for meaning, a poem to be 'understood' only when understanding is suspended and the rationalizing powers of the mind are asleep" (Hill, 162).

If we are to look at Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in the light of Pure Imagination and the

"One Life," the poem is certainly not about anything; but instead, it is a poem about "everything." I will attempt to bring to light another aspect of this "everything." There are two aspects of the poem, which I will discuss. The first concerns the role of the wedding ceremony as a juxtaposition of the Rime; and the second concerns the the theme of covenant within the Rime. Both discussions rely on Coleridge's conception of the "One Life."

"In the climate of diversity there is one crucial point of agreement; all concur that whatever Coleridge touches he transmutes; whatever he borrows or imitates, from earlier writers is transformed....into something rich and strange" (Hill 147). Certainly, Coleridge's diverse intellectual interests and diverse background gives account for the many diverse interpretations of "the Rime". Among the many aspects which influence "the Rime" is Coleridge's study of Scripture. The understanding of covenant within Scripture is exemplified in the Psalter.

Within the Books of the Old Testament, there lies a rich and deep poetic texts which enrich our understanding of a peoples historical and more importantly, their spiritual journey. These text are known as the Psalms. The Psalms recall for us the events of the Jewish community's spiritual progress which takes place within the ordinary or natural course of life while being intermingled with the supernatural. "The theme of the Old Testament Covenant Festival," found within the Psalter, "is the continually

renewed encounter of God with the people which has as its final aim the renewal of the Sinai covenant and of the salvation it promised" (Sabourin 127). Moreover, the Psalms are a recollection of God's covenant with man. In the context of covenant, the psalms collectively speak of Man's sinfulness, his guilt and remorse, and his eventual redemption. "The Rime" resemble this type of spiritual progression.

"The Psalter" has "been called a 'microcosm of the whole Old Testament' or 'the epitome of Israel's spiritual experience'" (Sabourin 25). These experiences are grouped into subtypes. These subtypes express different moods and occasions in which the individual or community acknowledged some aspect of covenant with God. The subtypes are Enthronement Hymns, Songs of Zion, Laments, Songs of Trust Thanksgiving, Hymns of Sacred History, Royal Psalms, Wisdom Psalms and in particular for this analysis, "Liturgies," mixed types that were composed for some special cultic occasion. These mixed types were expression of various sentiments "in the course of the same festival" (Sabourin 37). One presumed cultic occasion is an annual ceremony for renewing the covenant" (Oxford Annotated Bible 656).

It is the liturgical Psalm which best identifies with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Cultic "psalms may consist of parts belonging to different form types; hymns, praise, and lamentations. This variety may correspond to the liturgical setting" (Sabourin 37). In the "orthodox

Christian progression" of the poem "from sin and the recognition of sin, through repentance and punishment, to such redemption as is possible in the world" (Hill 155), there is a progression of mixed types that correspond and express the different sentiments of a spiritual journey within the poem.

"The Rime" resembles the Liturgical Psalm since it is also expressed within the context of a cultic occasion. "Cult or ritual may be defined as the socially established and regulated holy acts and words in which the encounter and communion of the Deity with the congregation is established" (Sabourin 34). The cultic occasion within the poem, the wedding ceremony, is the covenant made between man and woman. But more importantly, it expresses symbolically a fuller reality, a covenant with God. The wedding ceremony is juxtaposed to "the Rime". Though two different events occurring simultaneously, "the Rime" and the wedding symbolically represent a covenant with God within the poem. The wedding ceremony is not mentioned in depth. In fact, it is only referred to since it is the wedding guest that the Mariner detains from the wedding ceremony in order to tell his story. While the details of the wedding ceremony are not explicit, it is the occurrence of the ceremony which is significant. "Every year perhaps Israel celebrates a feast of the covenant; or more simply, every important feast has this significance" (Sabourin 132). This would not only be a time of making covenant but of renewing covenant as well.

The cultic celebration grants the Mariner the opportunity to renew his covenant by retelling his Rime.

Lines 21-22, "The Ship was cheered, the harbour cleared, Merrily did we drop...", corresponds with lines 33-34, "The bride hath passed into the hall/ Red as a Rose was she." Both events speak of movement. While, it is clear that the Bride is moving towards the marriage covenant; a commitment of obedience and fidelity, it is unclear what the Mariner is moving toward, until the end of the poem. In fact, it seems that the mariner is moving away from covenant. This seems to indicate that "the Rime", although a story about covenant, is taken from the perspective of exile, where the individual makes a return to the covenant. "The cult festival," in this case the wedding ceremony, "is better understood in the context of a pilgrimage to Zion" (Sabourin 127).

Equally significant in showing the juxtaposition within "the Rime" and the Wedding ceremony, is the relationship of the wedding party and the detained wedding guest. Both play an important role within the poem. As the wedding party, they are witnesses to the covenant which is taking place. They are also part of the covenant since as witnesses they must have an understanding of the ritual that is taking place. They must have a mutual acceptance and agreement of what the ritual symbolizes.

The witnesses must not only view and understand the ritual. They must also incorporate what they understand into

the values of their own lives. This makes the wedding party as much a part of the covenant as the Bride and Groom.

Like the wedding party, the detained wedding guest is also a representative of the community. The individual or "the 'I' of the psalms rarely or never represent a private individual... the 'I' is the community" (Sabourin 114). As representative of the community, he must follow the same guidelines as those who witness the wedding ceremony. As a witness to "the Rime", the wedding guest is witnessed the symbolism of the wedding ceremony. Furthermore, in a very unique way, the wedding guest is a part of the community because he is "next of kin." This emphasizes the intimacy of the community as one family; as one people.

Continuing from line 40 to 61, the poem refers to the spiritual struggle due to a lack of trust in God's ability to save man. The imagery takes a dramatic shift from the merriment and zealousness of a journey which has just been undertaken by the imagery of storm, "tyrannous and strong." Generally, any type of storm on the sea is connoted by the gender "She." In Coleridge's poem, "the Storm Blast" is represented by "He" which drives the ship into a sphere of ice, mist and snow. Coleridge uses the term "He" to express evil which leads the community of believers into a struggle which eventually deprives them from the warmth of God's Love. The manifestation of the storm is a metaphor for the internal struggle with this evil. "Using a physical voyage as structural scaffolding for spiritual

exploration...Coleridge's miniature epic in which the cycle of departure and return is a metaphor for spiritual growth and where the setting and events of the story give substance to the inner realities of the Mariner's...mind" (Hill 151).

The albatross can be interpreted as a salvific figure. The crew, (community), "hail" the bird "in God's Name. Since the albatross failed to work at the level of man's own will (Much like Jesus who failed to bring about the kingdom in the manner that the Jews expected), the Mariner, the "I" representing the community estranges himself from a relationship with God. The community's severing of this relationship, (covenant), is exemplified by the murder of the albaross.

In Part II of the Rime, the ramifications of the community's estrangement through the "I" is seen. The fickleness of the human character is clear, especially in regard toward man's dependance of his own power to overcome evil rather than relying on a Divine Power to save him. "For the Biblical writers, only God truly saves. Isolated or collectively, human forces could not save" (Sabourin 85). The crew called the murder of the albatross a "hellish act" since it was the albatross that lead the crew out of the ice and snow. The community then hails the the mariner for killing the bird because they had accused the bird of bringing the mist, but they had already forgotten that the bird had lead them out of the ice and snow.

The crew turned from the albatross by the mere fact

that it had not completely fulfilled their desires. The turning away or "more generally sin is considered by Old Testament writers as a refusal of God, as a rebellion against him, as a breaking of communion between Yahweh and a member of the covenant" (Sabourin 107). This rejection leads the community into the most dramatic and ironic movement of the poem.

In man's rejection of God, "the sinner's conduct does no harm to God but falls back upon the sinner's own head" (Sabourin 48). For the mariner, alienation and guilt are his reward for rejecting the albatross. In many of the psalms which speak of alienation from God, the Jewish community used the imagery of the desert, an environment with which they were accustomed, to express the estrangement from their Creator. Although Coleridge uses the analogy of the Sea Voyage to represent the Christian spiritual journey, he creates a desert experience within the midst of a plentitude of water. "Water water everywhere/ and all the boards did shrink./ Water, water everywhere/ and not a drop to drink." Water the source of life, now becomes a "dry and desolate land" of the psalms. "The silence of the sea...Every tongue, through utter drought was withered to the root... throats unslaked, with black lips baked... through utter drought all dumb we stood... Each throat was parched and glazed each eye." Furthermore in this moment of alienation, the finitude of man is discovered in Death. Spiritual Death is recognized through Life-in-Death.

By line 232, we are introduced to the mariner's recognition of his alienation and abandonment from God. "Alone, alone, all, all alone/ Alone on a wide wide sea!/ And never a saint took pity on/ My soul in agony." With the recognition of alienation comes the reality of guilt, "The look with which they looked on me/ Had never passed away," "But Oh! more horrible than that /Is the curse in a dead man's eye"; and remorse, "I looked to heaven and I tried to pray." But here the mariner is still unable to pray because he still rejects the power of God. He believes that the dead man's curse wields more power than that of God's power. In his book, *The Psalms: Their Origins and Meaning*, Sabourin express that:

"According to ancient opinion, all words were powerful in proportion to the power of the speaker: evil words, curses, abuse, threats, sneers, 'the evil eye'....in the eyes of the Israelites and of all other ancient orientals, all such things were powerful and would do harm to the soul and happiness of those against whom they are directed" (Sabourin 157).

The mariner can pray only when he realizes the beauty of God's creation and praises it. "The mariner's act of blessing the water snakes is both a turning-point and climax of the poem" (Hill 152). With this action, we see that the mariner is forgiven; this being a movement towards a renewal with God. This renewal is actualized in the symbolic act of

the Albatross falling from the mariners neck as soon as he was able to pray.

In part V, with the burden of guilt removed, the mariner finds himself in a state of renewal and refreshment. The paradoxical imagery of the desert experience amidst the surroundings of water is dissolved. Water now becomes the primary image of life-giving substance. "My lips were wet, my throat was cold,/My garments all were dank;/sure I had drunken in my dreams,/And still my body drank." What takes place is a thorough cleansing in which the mariner is released from the bonds of sin; causing him to feel light as a "Blessed Ghost."

After this renewal through water, comes the wind (the Spirit of God) to guide the mariner. "And soon I heard a roaring wind": "And the coming wind did roar more loud."

With the coming of the wind, the subjugation of the forces of nature and the supernatural by the Divine force is realized. Most importantly the subordination of the the forces of evil by the Angelic spirits is achieved. "Not only nor primarily the hosts of Israel, but the stars and heavenly powers too, and indeed all the cosmic forces are under God's command" (Sabourin 134). It is this wind which propells the ship at an unconcievable rate. This symbolizes the eagerness of God to draw us unto Himself. The wind drives the ship back to the place of its origin; back to the true community; a symbol of the covenant.

The mariner rejoices in the fact that he has returned

to his homeland, His recognition of his country parallels the Song of Ascent, in which the Jewish community gives praise and thanksgiving in their return to Jerusalem from exile (spiritually and physically). "Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed/ The light-house top I see?/ Is this the hill (Jerusalem)?/ is this the kirk (temple)?/ Is this mine own countree?"

As the mariner returns to his country, he is met by members of the community who receive him onto their boat. This is a sign of "fraternal unity and concord" that "was recommended in the Old Testament as a sure means of providing temporal blessing and temporal happiness" (O'Sullivan 225). The hermit is on the boat. His presence seems to symbolize a high priest of the temple who dispenses the laws and rituals of the covenant. As an institutional figure, the hermit is able to absolve the mariner of his sins. This is an act which is symbolic to the action which has already taken place. "The existence of outward signs does not necessarily make the religious experience less 'spiritual'; it only serves to reinforce the experience" (Sabourin 108). In a sense, this is the mariner presentation before the high priest which is part of the cleansing rite within the Jewish Law.

The boat in which the mariner first sailed, sinks; and he enters into the boat with the members of the community. This is a sign of the renewal of covenant. "Salvation history knows no return, only continuation" (Sabourin 138).

The sinking of the ship and the entrance onto the boat is a break between the old and new. It is the sign of God's forgiveness and the complete removal of sin. While there is a return to covenant, it is not the same relationship that the mariner had experienced before he had sinned. It is a new relationship established within the covenant.

This is the point of departure. "The Rime" is finished and returns to the scene in which the mariner had stopped the wedding guest. It is at the same time that the mariner finishes "the Rime", the wedding party "burst from the door." Each character has renewed their covenant. The mariner didactically speaks; expressing the importance of the community and covenant in reference to the wedding ceremony. "O sweeter than the marriage feast,/ tis sweeter far to me,/ to walk together to the kirk/ With goodly company." For the mariner, it is the assembling of the community that is important; the ritual is significant but secondary.

Know the wise mariner, "whose eye is bright," leaves the wedding guest with profound words to live by; words that are the essence of the covenant; "He prayeth best, who loveth best/All things both great and small/ For the dear God who loveth us/ He made and loveth all."

In light of this analysis of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," how does the marriage ceremony, the theme of covenant and the concept of the "One Life" interrelate in the poem? Within the analysis, it seems clear that the marriage ceremony is one symbolic act among many acts which

express a deeper reality; a covenant between God and man. The underlying theme of covenant within "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", underscores Coleridge's conception of the "One Life." The covenant and the "One Life" are unitive by nature. Both seek this unity through the use of symbols in the poem.

J. Robert Barth notes:

Symbol for Coleridge, "is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual, (the community represented by the 'I'). or of the General in the Especial, (covenant within the wedding ceremony) or of the Eternal through and in the Temporal, (God in nature). It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible: and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative" (Barth 4).

It is a mark then of the symbol to illuminate what would be otherwise impossible to comprehend. The function of "the Rime" as well as the function of the wedding ceremony within the poem accomplishes such a task. Through symbol, the world beyond the grasp of the visible eye is seen. "Through the cult..., the power of the Holy, its life or blessing, are bestowed upon the partakers, and a relationship is established or renewed between them and the deity. The 'fact of salvation' is actualized in the cult symbolically re-presented by a 'dramatic' re-enactment of the past"

(Sabourin 35). This re-enactment is actualized by the retelling of Mariner's "Rime". While it goes beyond the physical, symbol, unlike allegory, is not separate from what it represents. It is not one event merely referring to another event. It is part of the deeper reality to be perceived. In the case of "the Rime", the deeper reality is the covenant between God and man. A relationship between symbol and the reality to which the symbol points must exist. If such a relationship does not exist, then the human person is incapable of grasping a deeper awareness of himself or anything outside of himself, visible or invisible.

Coleridge saw as well, that the symbol is the unifying force to all reality. In a letter to Southey, Coleridge expresses, "that each Thing has a Life of its own, and yet they are all one life" (Swiatecka 4). What is it that allows Coleridge to make such an assertion that given any reality, all other realities are connected to it whether material or spiritual? The answer lies within Coleridge's concept of "consubstantiality."

The concept of "consustantiality" is derived from the traditional philosophical conception of the "participation" of all being. This concept allows every being to share in "being" from God to the lowest of finite creatures. Within the context of consubstantiality, we finally see the importance of imagination for Coleridge. "Coleridge speaks of the faculty of imagination as:

'that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to a system of symbol, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the conductors" (Barth 6).

This statement not only pertained to the reading of Scripture which Coleridge presented in the Statesman's Manual but pertained to all of Nature.

For Coleridge, the imagination was the symbol-making faculty which unifies; and what it unifies is limitless. What is produced from this symbol-making faculty is never a "new creation entirely." It is a power which blends and fuses and;

"reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial,

still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry" (BL, II, xiv 12).

The power of the imagination along with the characteristics already mentioned about symbolism, "the translucence of the Special in the Individual... the Eternal through and in the Temporal," develops the realization that the symbol permeates and penetrates through the existence of man and his world; "diffusing a tone and spirit of unity" which fuses all things together. But how is this unity, this one life perceived? Implicitly, the understanding of symbol and its relationship with the "One Life" in Coleridge's writings is a religious act. "Religion occupies the whole man, and the religious life is accordingly influenced by sense impressions called forth by symbolic actions" (Sabourin 108).

For Coleridge, all knowledge is from God; even within the development of the concept of Consubstantiality. Initially, the word, was meant to express the highest unity and participation of the Son and Spirit with God the Father while still maintaining that each person of the Trinity is different. This concept was developed during the Council of Nicea, 325 A.D.;, but in Coleridge's definition of symbol-making and symbol-perceiving, there is found the concept of unity and participation of all being. The way in which all beings participate is the Colridgian theory of Primary and Secondary imagination.

Coleridge's theory of:

"The Primary IMAGINATION (perceiving symbols) is the living Power and Prime Agent of all Human Perception and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination (symbol-making) I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation" (BL, I, 202).

Such participation with the infinite I Am is a religious act. But more precisely, it is an act of faith which is needed to comprehend the "true unity of being". This act of faith entails a commitment of the whole self.

Commitment, (covenant) is essential, in Coleridge's view, of the "union of a thinking and willing subject, (the mariner), with someone or something outside itself, (God)" (Barth 12). The act of faith, that commitment of the self within a relationship with the infinite I AM, might be considered to be sacramental.

A sacrament is a rite which points to something beyond itself. "It is an effacious sign; it actually makes present what it represents--the grace of God, which is a share in the life of God" (Barth 13). Within the sacrament, there is a union of subject and object; of God and man and it is through this sacrament that God imparts His Grace to man.

It is an invitation to participate in His Name and in His Power. Covenant through "Sacraments", then, "are ultimately the human mode of encounter with God" (Barth 14).

One critic of Coleridge's, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Mrs Barbauld, once "complained that the poem 'was impossible, and had no moral" (Jasper 50). As I perceive it, the Rime does have a moral message. It is a recapitulation of Coleridge' concept of Organic Unity or the "One Life" in poetic form rather than philosophic rhetoric. It is a message of living one's life in unity with God and His creation; and manifesting that unity through symbolic actions. These actions often speak of the covenant in which we partake. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the spiritual journey within that covenant is mingled with human weakness and sin; but it is also within this covenant that we find forgiveness and redemption.

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