

A NEW IDENTITY FOR THE MARINER?

A Further Exploration of "The Rime of The Ancyent Marinere"

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The aim of this paper is to understand the "Rime," more particularly the first version of 1797/1798, as a vision within a vision and specifically to identify the Mariner as a sometime seafarer engaged in the slave trade, guilty of the most appalling atrocities, but now endeavouring to come to terms with his deep despair and mental torment and overwhelming feelings of guilt by narrating orally this fiction that purports to be the truth. Probably the "Rime" has not been understood in this way previously, although the spectre barque of Book 3 has been identified as a slave ship. [\[1\]](#)

Such an interpretation could arguably be derived from a simple, if not a simplistic, application of historical materialism, but here the case for the hypothesis is presented somewhat differently. If the hypothesis is accepted, then a major thread, perhaps the thread, of the creative process which Coleridge specifically underwent for the composition of the first edition of the "Rime" is successfully disguised! The first edition of the "Rime" offers no significant internal evidence for this view: 658 lines long, it is characterized by its archaic language (arguably that of Elizabethan sea dogs from Coleridge's own West country. and themselves slave traders), by its relative absence of spiritual dimensions of reality so conspicuous in the better known versions, and by a preference for tactile imagery, such as the old man being threatened with the Wedding guest's staff or the albatross feeding on biscuit worms. But in this discussion I make no comparisons between the different versions: I assume that the first version remains the core of the poem.

Before endeavouring to assess the significance of Wordsworth's

enigmatic critique, [\[2\]](#) and the remarkable light which I believe is thrown on the "Rime" by Southey's "The Sailor who had served in the slave trade", [\[3\]](#) and finally Coleridge's own immense secretiveness about the "Rime," I wish to emphasise that the hypothesis should not be viewed in any way as a reduction or disparagement of the poem. One immediate advantage of the hypothesis which is not trivial, is a decisive rebuttal of any suggestion that the Mariner's plea for love towards the end of the poem is banal or trite.

First, let us take seriously the poem as a great poem (without here any formal attempt at a definition of a great poem) and accept as valid Wordsworth's theory of the composition of poetry, itself in all likelihood an outcome of his symbiotic relationship with Coleridge:

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. [\[4\]](#)

The strength of Coleridge's intellect and his investment in the poem in terms of time spent and intensity of effort is verifiable enough.

We may find the "Rime" deeply moving. Coleridge's own humanity shining in his prose and poetry with his attachment both to the ethics of the Gospels, as he interpreted them, and to basic principles, is well-known. Moreover, in the "Rime" the Mariner has a propensity to confuse identity; it is part of the singularity of his vision. A great climax is the episode of the water snakes. Should we also have in mind "waking slaves" ? Had Coleridge ever read Blake's *America*, Plate 6 while browsing in London in 1793 or 1794? "Let the slave grinding in the mill run out into the fields; /Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air" et seq. If not, certainly the motif of freedom cherished by abolitionists was known to him. In *Table Talk* [\[5\]](#) Coleridge wonders whether in *Macbeth* "blanket of the darke" should not be read as "black height of the dark".

Secondly, consider the intellectual symbiosis at the material time of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and indeed Dorothy Wordsworth. Within limits there existed strong

differences of opinion but never hostility. They were profoundly aware of and deeply cherished their bonds of friendship. So it is wrong, I contend to attribute a hostile or improper motive to Wordsworth for writing and publishing his critique of the "Rime." Philosophical differences between the two poets certainly persisted. Much later we see this theme developed in *Biographia Literaria* but never with personal animosity; indeed the reverse.

Now for the moment I refer not to the "great defects" alleged by Wordsworth but to the opening and closing passages of the critique and to the third paragraph at the commencement of the whole preface. [6] The wording before the alleged defects are listed is emphatically not patronising, despite first appearances. It is in place given that the authorship of the *Lyrical Ballads* had ceased to be anonymous so far as Wordsworth was concerned. There is arguably officiousness in Wordsworth's prose but significantly no misrepresentation was ever alleged. At the end of 1800, Coleridge stated that Wordsworth was "a great, a true Poet -- I am only a kind of a Metaphysician". [7] The correct interpretation, as I see it, of Wordsworth's critique strongly contrasts with the opinions of Lowes in *The Road to Xanadu*, Stephen Gill in *William Wordsworth: A Life* and Richard Holmes in *Coleridge: Early Visions*, who all adversarially criticise Wordsworth in this context. In my opinion Wordsworth's enigmatic critique stands within the symbiosis of the two poets. I also believe Wordsworth's business arrangements for future editions of *Lyrical Ballads*, including the order of poems, was not a matter of moment as Coleridge himself clearly understood.

Thirdly, there should be taken fully into account Coleridge's detestation of slavery and the slave trade. Here there is not merely the

deepest feeling of humanity and ethical commitment but also careful intellectual assessment. The verse is telling. [8]

We see that for Coleridge participation in the slave trade, and open support for it, was a gross identification with evil, i.e. evil within the context of Christian religious belief, including for Coleridge the prospect, if not the reality, of a hell for the punishment of wrong-doing. In prose as well as verse the tenet is not less evident. With Southey Coleridge prepared a lecture at Bristol for 16 June 1795. The substance of the lecture, prepared if not delivered, became the core of Coleridge's article in *The Watchman* of March 25 1796. The content is extraordinarily powerful. Something of it is incorporated into the "Rime," particularly the actual physical depreciation of slave ships. In the lecture, but not

the article, Coleridge referred to a future of disease and/or alcoholism as generally the lot of former seafarers in the slave trade. It is very pertinent that for Coleridge the issue of the abolition of the slave trade was one of the major issues of contemporary politics, and this had been the case since he had written his prize ode in his student days.

Coleridge estimated the number of victims of the slave trade as exceeding 180 million up to a date much earlier than 1798. In *The Watchman* article he commented how the public, meaning principally the intelligentsia, had been saturated by anti-slavery propaganda; he did not resent this, even welcomed it, but like other abolitionists he had by 1798 to come to terms with the continuation of the slave trade under British auspices for an indefinite future.

Fourthly, forming part of the background for the hypothesis of this paper, Coleridge's expertise in dealing with the mentations of guilt, remorse and contrition within a structure of faith that included the promise of a benign hereafter, the indispensability of a quest for personal

salvation, and the need for belief in morality as he interpreted it. Coleridge's interest and knowledge may here fairly be taken for granted. Several specifics are worthy of mention however. There is Coleridge's war service, December 1793 to April 1794. For the first time in his life, Coleridge came into close contact with actual or potential war criminals at a rank and file level, and not merely officers and gentlemen such as his own kith and kin. The main role of the British Army in the warfare of the 1790s was to campaign in the West Indies to protect and further the interests and ambitions of the plantation owners, themselves intimately connected with the slave trade. Coleridge's sermon at Shrewsbury during January 1798 [\[9\]](#) concentrated on the innocence and harsh fate of young drummer boys, themselves vital for a battlefield. The immorality of warfare was comparable for Coleridge with that of the slave trade.[\[10\]](#) We have seriously to contrast the significance of the slaughter of the albatross, figuring so large in the Mariner's own vision, with that of the mass murder of human beings including soldiers, sailors and slaves. The scope of Coleridge's own life experience is readily apparent as a foundation for the Mariner's own deep despair and identification with his victims, i.e. slaves.

It may now be ripe to give attention to the four "great defects" listed by Wordsworth.

My first point is that if we accept the truth of the hypothesis of this paper, there is a complete and overwhelming repudiation of the defects as alleged. In my opinion this is remarkable.

(1) The Mariner has a distinct identity, as specific as that of the garrulous retired sea captain, the story-teller of the "The Thorn," or as that of Simon Lee, who is singled out by Lowes. [\[11\]](#) The content of the Mariner's vision, which is the subject of the Mariner's fiction, assumes the validity of the supernatural. The element of the

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supernatural is as specific if not more so than that which explains the strange fate of Harry Gill in "Goody Blake and Harry Gill." The supernatural element is part of the dreadful thought pattern of the Mariner.

(2) After the crucial event, the fictional killing of the albatross, the Mariner does indeed behave passively, exactly as a slave does who is in Aristotle's words "a living tool." Like Coleridge, Wordsworth knew of inversion in a vision where the subject identifies himself as the opposite of himself; in this instance the Mariner identifies himself as a slave, with all that this implies for dehumanisation.

(3) Because the Mariner himself has no expertise in art form and speaks from his own torment, a warped reason and understanding, it is entirely credible that the events of the Mariner's fiction have no necessary connections and do not produce each other. The high standards of "Tintern Abbey" are simply inapplicable.

(4) As just mentioned, one can grasp that the imagery is somewhat too *laboriously* accumulated. Coleridge had to "slave" to compose the poem, we know, and enjoyed his awful punning, about which his friends joked thus *laboriously*.

Did Wordsworth know of Coleridge's reliance on the identity of the Mariner as here postulated? If so, one can understand his absolute refusal as "a gentleman" (as he would have seen it) to disclose another's secrets, especially those of his most intimate friends. I am suggesting that Wordsworth was aiming inter alia to persuade Coleridge into giving a full explanation. Wordsworth may not have had any great hope his aim would succeed. He had already demoted the revised "Rime" (Coleridge's second version) to 23rd place in *Lyrical Ballads* from first place, but it is fair to comment that the aim of his critique would have seemed worthwhile, not

least on grounds of principle including intellectual integrity.

If Coleridge had positively responded to the coded invitation of Wordsworth to disclose the truth, then the very artful, contrived, and superficially arch and stilted language and style of the critique, as provided for in the opening and closing passages, would have ensured no diminishing of Wordsworth's own status: Wordsworth certainly possessed the ability for such deviousness as, say, *The Borderers* shows, his drama in verse so much admired by Coleridge.

Southey's poem "The Sailor who had Served in the Slave Trade" provides further evidence for the hypothesis. An archetypal seafarer travels on a slave ship to the Guinea coast to collect 300 negro slaves, as did the seadog Hawkins in 1562 in the first such voyage. Some of the slaves refuse to eat and on his captain's orders the seaman flogs to death a woman slave. Back in Bristol, overwhelmed by his guilt, he confesses to a minister who finds him in torment in a cowhouse. Possibly a cowhouse has a colloquial meaning as a brothel. The sailor is advised to embrace Christianity to obtain salvation. This poem, originally 124 lines in 31 stanzas of four lines each, was omitted from the OUP collected works of Southey in 1909. I do not know why, but it may explain why it has hitherto been largely overlooked, although not by Malcolm Ware. (op cit)

When we link the "Rime" and Southey we may tend to close our minds to anything except Southey's contribution to the *Critical Review* of October 1798: "We do not sufficiently understand the story to analyse it. It is a Dutch attempt at German sublimity. Genius has here been employed producing a poem of little merit." It is easy enough, perhaps facile, to attribute improper motives to Southey who was then estranged from Coleridge, such as anger or jealousy. However, "The Sailor" poem and its origins are I believe of great importance.

"The Sailor" first appears in a letter from Southey to his brother Tom, a naval officer at Portsmouth, written in September or October 1798 (the post mark is obscured). After the text of the poem, which is in Edith's handwriting, is the comment "This my dear Tom which Edith has copied for you is a true story. It is

about six weeks since a friend of Cottle found a sailor thus praying in a cowhouse and held a conversation with him of which the exact substance is in the ballad."

This prose note, taken with the style, diction, reiteration, metre and story of the poem itself, shows overwhelming correspondences with the "Rime" of 1798. Note for example line 25: "Oh I have done a wicked thing"! Southey must have fictionalised the origin of "The Sailor." He would have read the "Rime" probably through the good offices of Cottle. "The Sailor" went through many editions, but early on there is a new first stanza where "Bristol's ancient towers" rhymes with "month of flowers" (perhaps written in May 1798?). A final stanza ends "and some who read the dreadful tale/ Perhaps will aid with theirs."

One must draw one of two inferences.[\[12\]](#) Either Southey in his poem tells us, first of all telling Tom, what Coleridge ought to have written in the "Rime;" or he writes -- and I prefer this alternative -- what he is reasonably certain Coleridge had in mind. Either way there is proof of how strongly both Southey and Coleridge thought and felt in opposition to the slave trade. Southey in 1798 remained a political radical, strongly opposed to Pitt's government. As late as 1800 Southey was to write that there could be no freedom in Britain while Pitt remained Prime Minister. In the midst of the authoritarianism and climate of oppression in 1798, it is understandable Southey did not mention Coleridge by name in his letter to his brother Tom. Clearly Tom could have been prejudiced by a mention of Coleridge's name in the letter, if the letter had fallen into the wrong

hands.

It is notorious Coleridge himself always declined to comment significantly on the "Rime," particularly the first version. Consider his own title for the 1800 edition, "A Poet's Reverie," and compare the sub-title of "Kubla Hhan," "A vision in a Dream". *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter IV, might at first sight seem promising, but it is limited expressly to a consideration of the two volume edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, so the 1798 "Rime" is excluded. In Chapter XIV the striking reference to "every human being who from whatever source of delusion has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency" could perfectly fit the mentation of the Mariner himself. Notebooks for the year 1798, several minor entries apart, are one understands, missing. Thus any response, if there was one, to Wordsworth's or Southey's strictures, seems to have been verbal only, and it is noteworthy that no disruption of their friendship can be traced to these strictures, Southey's outburst in the *Critical Review* included.

Why should Coleridge have wanted the secret (assuming the hypothesis of this paper is correct) not to be revealed? I suggest his motivation had two foundations, one practical the other theoretical. First there was the stick which critics prospectively wielded. Though Southey may have had a personal grudge, the prestigious Dr. Burney, a representative of the intelligentsia if anyone was, lashed out in the *Monthly Review* of June 1799 not only at the "Rime" but also at Wordsworth's "The Convict" and Coleridge's "The Dungeon." Southey for his part liked "The Dungeon," consistent with his own authorship of "The Sailor" poem. Dr. Burney was upset about "The Convict" and "The Dungeon" because too much sympathy was being displayed for criminals and too little for their victims: "Here concern and tenderness for criminals seems pushed to excess". "The Convict" only appeared in the 1798 edition and "The Dungeon" was dropped after the 1800 one. Had Coleridge told the truth (as

here postulated) about the "Rime" we can imagine the utter abhorrence of many members of the intelligentsia, which would certainly have been anticipated by Coleridge. It would not have helped that the question of whether the Mariner ever attains salvation is left an open one in all versions of the "Rime." The Slave trade lobby would have been gloating at the confusion in the ranks of abolitionists. The following excerpt from *The Gentleman's Magazine* of September 1798 is beastly but competent propaganda, and shows, with much else highly derogatory about Coleridge published in 1798, how the anti-Jacobins presented a threat to him:

Squire Coleridge was educated at Christ's Hospital, and sent thence to Jesus College, whence this worthy gentleman and splendid genius ran away, nobody knew why, nor whither he was gone, in consequence of which, the master and fellows had ordered him to be written off the books; and a general court of Christ's Hospital, on April 24, 1795, ordered the exhibitions which they allowed him to cease, and the next news heard of him was, that he was become as exalted a democrat as Mr Thelwall or Mr Horne Took. Let the memoir-writer, who mourns over his "disappointed hope and distressful adversity", say who is the cause of it. [\[13\]](#)

While it may be worthwhile considering the financial implications for Coleridge of disclosure, I am reserved about this for the time being. I turn to the philosophical

implications: the Mariner has, historically speaking, taken nearly every one in. If on the other hand we assume that the Mariner at some point in a moment of lucidity was fully aware of himself as an author of fiction, then one can take the argument further. Coleridge's whole system of Christian faith may be open to profound doubt. My own view is that Coleridge, given a choice, did not wish to face such a grave dilemma. As with "Kubla Hhan," which arguably remained unfinished because of its omission of Christianity, his reaction was deliberate. Mystification as a literary device accompanied "Christabel" as well. In the case of the "Rime" the centre of gravity shifted after the first version continually in the direction of an assertion of the validity of transcendental dimensions. It would have made Coleridge's life unbearable,

I believe, for the poem to have been dealt with otherwise. So the true meaning of the "Rime" will have remained obscured.

On no account am I suggesting or admitting any impulse to disparage the "Rime." If I have understood the "Rime" correctly, it stands, I believe, as an even greater poem than currently supposed -- and with a much greater specific import in its first version, that of 1798.

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Appendix

Southey, "The Sailor who had Served in the Slave Trade"

Text from Robert Southey's letter to his brother Tom, Sept/Oct 1798

He stopt it surely was a groan
That from the hovel came
He stopt & listened anxiously
Again it sounds the same.

It surely from the hovel comes
And now he hastens there -
And thence he hears -- the name of Christ
Amidst a broken prayer.

He entered in the hovel now
A Sailor there he sees.
His hands were lifted up to heaven
And he was on his knees.

Nor did the sailor so intent
His entering footsteps heed,
But now the Lords prayer said & now
His half forgotten creed.

And often on his saviour calls
With many a bitter groan.

In such heart anguish as could spring
From deepest guilt alone.

He asked the miserable man
Why he was kneeling there,
And what the crime had been that caused
The anguish of his prayer.

Oh I have done a wicked thing
It haunts me night & day
And I have sought this lonely place
Here undisturbed to pray.

I have no place to pray on board
So I came here alone,
That I might freely kneel & pray
And call on Christ & groan

If to the main-mast head I go,
The wicked one is there.
From place to place, from rope to rope
He follows every where.

I shut my eyes -- it matters not --

Still still the same I see, --
And when I lie me down at night
Tis always day with me.

He follows follows every where,
And every place is hell –
O God -- & I must go with him
In endless fire to dwell.

He follows follows every where,
Hes still above -- below,
Oh tell me where to fly from him!
Oh tell me where to go.

But tell me quoth the Stranger then.
What this thy crime hath been,
So haply I may comfort give
To me that grieves for sin.

Oh I have done a cursed deed
The wretched man replies
And night & day & every where
Tis still before my eyes.

I saild on board a Guinea-man
And to the slave coast went,
Would that the sea had swallowd me
When I was innocent.

And we took in our cargo there
Three hundred negro slaves,
And we saild homeward merrily
Over the ocean waves.

But some were sulky of the slaves
And would not touch their meat,
So therefore we were forced by threats
And blows to make them eat.

One woman sulkier than the rest
Would still refuse her food,
O Jesus God! I hear her cries —
I see her in her blood!

The Captain made me tie her up
And flog while he stood by,
And then he cursd me if I staid
My hand to hear her cry.

She groand, she shriekd -- I could not spare
For the Captain he stood by
Dear God that I might rest one night
From that poor woman's cry!

She twisted from the blows -- her blood
Her mangled flesh I see -
And still the Captain would not spare
Oh he was worse than me!

She could not be more glad than I
When she was taken down.
A blessed minute -- twas the last
That I have ever known!

I did not close my eyes all night
Thinking what I had done
I heard her groans & they grew faint
About the rising sun

She groand & groand, but her groans grew
Fainter at morning tide,
Fainter & fainter still they came

Till at the noon she died.

They flung her overboard, poor wretch

She rested from her pain

But when O Christ -- O blessed God --

Shall I have rest again.

I saw the sea close over her,

Yet she was still in sight --

I see her twisting every where

I see her day & night.

Go where I will, do what I can

The wicked one I see.

Dear Christ have mercy on my soul.

O God deliver me!

Tomorrow I set sail again

Not to the Negro shore -

Wretch that I am I will at least

Commit that sin no more.

O give me comfort if you can

Oh tell me where to fly -

And bid me hope, if hope there be
For one so lost as I.

Poor wretch, the stranger he replied,
Put thou thy trust in heaven,
And call on him for whose dear sake
All sins shall be forgiven.

This night at least is thine, go thou
And seek the house of prayer –
There shalt thou hear the word of God
And he will help thee there!

This my dear Tom which Edith has copied for you is a true story. It is about six weeks since a friend of Cottle found a sailor thus praying in a cowhouse & held a conversation with him of which the exact substance is in the Ballad.

[1] By Malcolm Ware, *Philological Journal* XLIV (October, 1961). I am indebted to Peter Larkin for this reference.

[2] See Wordsworth & Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London, 1968), pp. 276-77. For commentary on the note see John

Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, Chap. XII, note 17 (London, 1927), p. 520-21.

[3] Text of first version is in Robert Southey's letter to his brother Tom, Sept/Oct 1798. British Library: Additional MSS 30,927. The poem as a whole is reprinted below.

[4] Brett and Jones, p. 246.

[5] 6th edition (London, 1884), p. 253.

[6] Commencing "For the sake of variety . . . Brett and Jones, p. 242.

[7] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (London, 1966), Vol. II, p. 371.

[8] "Fears in Solitude," lines 41-53 and 123-130 and the cancelled 5th stanza of "France: An Ode."

[9] See Hazlitt's account in "My First Acquaintance with Poets."

[10] Cf. "Fears in Solitude" (see above) and also "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter," first published in the *Morning Post*, January 8, 1798.

[11] See Lowes, Chapter XII.

[12] I write without benefit of a sight of Southey's *Commonplace book*. A mid-Victorian edition which I have seen is avowedly highly selective.

[13] *The Gentleman's Magazine* (September, 1798), pp. 773-74.