

THE ROMANTIC POETS

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Chapter II: Wordsworth And Coleridge

[...]

The Ancient Mariner fulfils the Coleridgean part of the joint bargain in *Lyrical Ballads*—to treat subjects “supernatural or at least romantic”, but to make them credible by truth to human nature and feeling, so as to cause “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith.” This might suggest the imposing of naturalistic characters on a fantastic plot—what happens for instance in Shakespeare’s comedies. But this is not what happens in *The Ancient Mariner*: there is no naturalistic character-drawing, and the truth to human nature and feeling is of a different kind. Outwardly the most obvious thing about the poem is that it is part of the mediaevalizing movement that had been going on since the time of Gray. In this case the mediaeval influence at work is that of the ballads. *Percy’s Reliques*, containing a large selection of the traditional ballad-poetry, had appeared in 1765. Literary appreciation of the ballads had never wholly ceased [...]

But, of course, the subject is not a mediaeval one at all. Its material is drawn from the voyages of the Elizabethan seamen. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge were great readers of books of travel. [...] Coleridge was actually very widely read in such literature, and the structure of the poem is that of a typical voyage round the Cape Horn, in which the ship, in the struggle against the westerlies, is driven to the high south latitudes, the land of ice and snow. [...] As it happens, we have a notebook of Coleridge’s with records and excerpts from his reading about this time. This has been investigated by Professor John Livingston Lowes in his book *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), which forms the most complete and fascinating record of the genesis of a poem that we possess.

Can we speculate a little about what the purpose is? Wordsworth suggested that the Mariner should kill the Albatross, and that the tutelary spirits of those regions should take it upon themselves to avenge the crime:⁹ and this is the formal theme of the poem. Coleridge adds a moral—that the Mariner is “to teach, by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth”. Mrs. Barbauld complained that the poem had no moral, but Coleridge replied that in his judgement it had too much.¹⁰ However this may be, we can, I think, be sure, as so often with Wordsworth too, that the controlling impulse of the poem is not a moral one, or not merely a moral one; it is something more. What Wordsworth put in his initial suggestion, what Coleridge put in the gloss quoted above, are not what the poem is “about”. In a sense this must always be true, even of the most manufactured poem: if it can be adequately summarized in a maxim, why write the poem? But we mean something more than this about *The Ancient Mariner*: the poem does not state a result, it symbolizes a process.

[Here Gough gives an explanatory account of the poem, quote extensively from it.]

The poem is more than an allegory of guilt and regeneration. In any ordinary sense the Mariner is very little guilty. But he has broken the bond between himself and the life of Nature, and in consequence becomes spiritually dead. What happens to him when he blesses the water-snakes in the tropical calm is a psychic rebirth—a rebirth that must at times happen to all men and all cultures unless they are to dry up in a living death. The whole poem is indeed a vivid presentation of the rebirth myth as conceived by Jung¹¹—the psychologist who has done most to explain these recurrent forms of imaginative literature. But such explanations of poetry are not convincing to everyone and are not easily demonstrable, so I will not labour the point. What we must explain is that it is not the final “moral”, it is the living symbolization of this universal psychic experience that gives the poem its lasting power. It is as though Coleridge tapped a deeper level of consciousness here than he was ever to reach again.