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Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Poetic Technique Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 21 February 2017 - 6:00PM

Location: Museum of London

21 February 2017

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge:
'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and Poetic Technique**

Professor Belinda Jack

We've been listening to Beethoven's ninth symphony. Coleridge was one of the key founders of the Romantic tradition of English poetry and he, like his contemporaries was fascinated by the relationship between poetry and the other arts, including music. Like Beethoven, Coleridge believed that art was not about charting landscapes, or happenings, or the natural world in its seasons, but about the interrelationship between the external world and human consciousness. And both Beethoven's 9th and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* were considered by some of their contemporaries as incomprehensible, as works of madness. His close friend and collaborator, William Wordsworth, in a letter to Joseph Cottle in 1799, wrote, in relation to *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, first published in 1798 in which *The Rime* first appeared:

From what I can gather it seems that the Ancient Mariner has upon the whole been an injury to the volume, I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on. If the volume should come to a second Edition I would put in its place some little things which would be more likely to suit the common taste.

This volume is often seen as the publication that marked the beginning of the English Romantic movement in literature.

Coleridge is also famous for his lifelong battle with laudanum, a tincture of opium and a potent narcotic. And the relationship between his wild, creative imagination and his drug-taking has been much discussed.

In a letter to Joseph Cottle in April 1814, Coleridge wrote:

"I was seduced into the ACCURSED Habit ignorantly - I had been almost bed ridden for many months with swelling in my knees - in a medical journal I happily met with an account of a cure performed in a similar case ... by rubbing in of Laudanum, at the same time taking a given dose internally - it acted like a charm, like a miracle! ... At length, the unusual stimulus subsided - the complaint returned - the supposed remedy was recurred to - but I cannot go thro' the dreary history - Suffice to say, that effects were produced, which acted on me by Terror & Cowardice of PAIN and sudden death." [April, 1814, Coleridge Letters Vol. 3, page 476]

The most popular story that connects Coleridge's work with his laudanum habit was told by Coleridge in his well-known preface to the poem *Kubla Khan*. Coleridge described having fallen into an opium-induced sleep. He writes of himself in the third person:

"The author continued for about 3 hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two or three hundred lines ... On waking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole and taking up his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surfaces of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but alas! without the after restoration of the latter!"

Yet Coleridge defined poetry not as a wild, uncontrolled hallucination, or trancelike, but as originating in an act of supreme attentiveness. He wrote this definition in a letter of July 1802, 'A great poet ... must have the ear of a wild Arab listening in the silent desert, the eye of a North American Indian tracing the footsteps of an enemy upon the leaves that strew the forest, the touch of a blind man feeling the face of a darling child.' It is sensory experience which connects us to the world and it is the myriad and mysterious ways in which these stimuli engage with the human consciousness that interests Coleridge.

The poem began with a dream, but not Coleridge's. A neighbour told of a dream to Wordsworth, who relayed it to Coleridge. Initially the two poets intended to collaborate, as on some other poems, but in the end it became Coleridge's. J.C.C. Mays, one of the great editors of Coleridge's poetry, referring to its unique status as a poem that exists in a number of different versions, also writes that the Rime 'became a mirror in which Coleridge came to see his fate as endlessly reflected.' Mays is so absorbed in the Coleridge corpus that his own critical writings

have a Coleridgean nuance. It wasn't until after writing *The Ancient Mariner* that Coleridge first went to sea, on a ship bound for Hamburg. (Beer, p.185) In a letter he revealed his attentiveness to his surroundings:

About 4 o'clock I saw a wild duck swimming on the waves - a single solitary duck - You cannot conceive how interesting a thing it looked in that round objectless desert of waters.' (*Collected Letters*, I, p.426)

It's as though his vision of things has been shaped by the *Rime*. Writers draw on experience, of course, but their writings also shape their experience.

So for those of you who don't know the poem, how can it be summarised?

The poem is divided into seven parts:

Part I: The Wedding guest, the voyage, stuck in ice, he kills the albatross.

The Mariner stops a wedding guest and insists on telling him his story. The ship sails south to the equator. The wedding guest hears the music of wedding beginning and tries to leave. A storm hits the ship and drives them south where they become stuck in ice. An albatross appears and is befriended by the crew. A south wind blows up and takes them northward. The Mariner kills the albatross with his crossbow.

Part II: They suffer punishment for his crime and are becalmed.

The crew at first condemn him for the killing but when the fog dissipates they commend him. They sail north and become becalmed at the equator. They suffer from agonising thirst. Slimy things are on the surface, the lights on the water are 'burnt green, and blue and white'. A spirit follows them under the ship nine fathoms down. The seamen hang the dead albatross around the Mariner's neck.

Part III: A skeleton ship comes, and its ghastly crew gambles for their souls. The crew dies.

He sees a ship far off. The crew celebrates, thinking that they will be saved, but then despair when they wonder how a ship can sail without wind. It turns out to be a skeleton ship with only one woman, Life-in-Death, and a mate, Death, for crew, aboard.

They through dice for the crew and she wins. The sun sets and the skeleton ship leaves. The crew dies, one by one, and their souls fly out, 'to bliss or woe'.

Part IV: He is left alone for seven days. He blesses the water snakes, and the spell is broken.

The wedding guest is afraid that the Mariner is a ghost, but the Mariner assures him that he did not die. The Mariner is alone and tries to pray unsuccessfully. For seven days he looks at the dead men and, 'Yet I cannot die'. He sees the water snakes lit up by the moon and blesses them. Suddenly he is able to pray and the albatross falls from his neck.

Part V: It rains. The ship is moved north, its crew reanimated by spirits. He swoons and hears two voices.

He sleeps and when he awakes it is raining. A storm blows up and the dead seamen arise, and start to man the ship once more. 'It had been strange, even in a dream, / To have seen those dead men rise.' The wedding guest is afraid, but is reassured that it is not the souls of the dead men that reanimate them, but 'a troop of spirits blest'. They sing around the mast, continuing to sail on, moved from the depths beneath. The spirit from the snow and ice moves them to the equator again, where the ship stands still. It moves back and forth then makes a sudden bound. The Mariner falls into a swoon. He hears two voices in his sleep tell of his crime and trials.

Part VI: The two voices talk. He wakes up in his native land. The spirits signal the shore, and a boat appears.

The two voices talk back and forth as the ship is driven faster and faster He wakes and the ship now sails slowly. The crew is still up, and their eyes curse him. Suddenly the spell is broken and a sweet breeze blows on him and him alone. He sees his native land. The spirits leave the dead bodies and each appears in its own form, full of light. They stand as signals to the land, but make no sound. A boat is heard coming towards him. The Pilot, his boy, and the Hermit are all in the boat. He hopes that the Hermit will shrive his soul - provide atonement - to wash away the blood of the albatross.

Part VII: The ship sinks but he is saved. He is compelled to wander and tell his tale.

The Hermit who lives in the woods loves to talk to mariners from faraway lands. The lights of the signal have disappeared, and the boat appears warped and the sails are like skeletons. As they approach a rumble is heard under the water and the ship then splits and sinks. The Mariner is dragged aboard the boat. When he moves his lips they scream and the Pilot faints. The Mariner takes the oars. When they reach the land he implores the Hermit to atone him. The Mariner is overcome by a fit which forces him to tell his tale. Since then, he has had to travel from land to land telling his tale. He has powers of speech and knows the men to whom he must tell his

tale.

The sounds of merriment come from the wedding party within. He tells how sweet it is for him to have company after being alone on the sea and tells the wedding guest to love all things both great and small. The wedding guest leaves, 'A sadder and a wiser man,/ He rose the morrow morn.' (adapted from <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/mariner.htm>)

The Rime is unique in the corpus of Coleridge's poems in the continued steady thought he gave to it. It was composed between Nov 1797 and March 1798, and revised between 1800 and 1834.

But even so Coleridge is not, as James Fenton writes in the introduction to his edition of the 1798 version of the Rime, 'a perfect poet, in the way that, say, George Herbert is a perfect poet. That is to say, with Herbert you feel that the forms and the language are perfectly congruent with the purposes of the poet' (vii). Herbert's poems, he goes on to write 'are not problem-strewn', implying that Coleridge's are. He is then explicit: 'Coleridge's poems... bring with them all kinds of fascinating doubts'.

And in a conversation with William Hazlitt, writer, critic, painter, social commentator, and philosopher, Coleridge wrote: 'The definite, the fixed, is death: the principle of life is the indefinite, the growing, the moving, the continuous' (quoted by John Beer, epigraph to his study, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence*).

It is our fluid, uncertain response to the poem that accounts, at least in part, for the poetry's mesmerizing power.

Just as the wedding guest, waylaid by the ancient mariner is mesmerized by the old man's story, so are we too.

The Rime is written in ballad form. Here is a lucid description of it:

The distinctive quality that popular ballads share is sparseness: they are apt to deal only with the culminating incident or climax of a plot, to describe that event with intense compression, to put the burden of narration on allusive monologue or dialogue, and to avoid editorial comment. This concentration upon the bare essential is precisely the quality that the fallible human memory is likely not only to preserve but also to enhance, for the effort of remembering causes a sloughing-off of what is not strictly relevant. Some of the best of the ballads may have thus been refined in their transmission through people's minds, gaining rather than losing artistic stature. The fact that ballads were originally songs is important to their development. The simplicity of the tunes to which they were sung not only influenced the distinctive verse form—normally a quatrain with four stresses per line—but also encouraged a corresponding simplicity in the narrative itself, and made individualizing flourishes impossible. (W.W.Norton)

The reception of the first edition of *The Rime* was mixed to say the least. Charles Lamb remarked that '*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a poem 'fertile in unmeaning miracles', but also referred to the 'fifty passages as miraculous as the miracles they celebrate.'

Dr Charles Burney famously offered the following remarks about the poem: 'though it seems a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence, there are in it poetical touches of an exquisite kind.' ('The Rime of the Ancient Mariner': Coleridge's Multiple Models of Interpretation Elizabeth A. Rubasky).

Robert Southey wrote that, 'Many of the stanzas are laboriously beautiful; but in connection they are absurd or unintelligible', specifically five stanzas early in part five. (See, "Unmeaning Miracles" in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" Author(s): Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr. Source: South Atlantic Review, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Jan., 1981), pp. 16-26).

Nineteen years after its first appearance, in 1817, Coleridge published a new edition, complete with a prose gloss in the left margins. Why did Coleridge produce this edition? And how should we read the poem in the light of their addition? Coleridge claimed that a test of poetry was, and I quote, 'the untranslatable-ness into words of the same language without injury to the meaning' (*Biographia Literaria*, p.263). Surely Coleridge's decision to provide a gloss runs wholly contrary to this idea. And in another essay in the *Biographia Literaria* he wrote of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, which I mentioned in my last lecture, 'You seem to be told nothing, but to see and hear everything; there is a perpetual activity of attention required on the part of the reader' (*BL*, p.177). Surely Coleridge's glosses are precisely *telling* us how read the poem, requiring us no longer to make that act of attentiveness.

Let's look at some examples.

Here is stanza 11 of Part 1:

"And now the Storm-blast came, and he

Was tyrannous and strong:

He struck with his o'ertaking wings,

And chased us south along.

A good many poetic techniques are at work here: the storm is personified as a winged creature, foreshadowing the albatross, the bird at the centre of the poem. The force of the wind is suggested by the enjambment which pushes us on from the end of the first line into the second, and likewise the steady iambs, first unstressed, second stressed syllables: di-dum, di-dum, di-dum... .

So how do we read the gloss: 'The ship driven by a storm toward the South Pole?' Nothing is added. The gloss serves no purpose. All it does is to reduce the suggestive poetry of the verse to a dull prose version. Furthermore the sense of powerlessness of the crew being 'chased', emphasised by the enjambment and the regular iambs is brought to a sudden halt by the prose gloss which we read between stanzas.

Let's take another example. Six stanzas from the end of the poem we read:

The moving moon went up the sky,

And no where did abide:

Softly she was going up,

And a star or two beside.

The alliteration, 'moving moon', and the assonance 'moving moon', suggest an ordered universe, a celestial harmony. The moon is personified, 'Softly she...', accompanied by 'a star or two'. This is a serene scene - an 'all is well in the heavens'.

What then do we make of the gloss?

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly unexpected, and yet there is silent joy at their arrival.

There were ten words in the previous gloss we looked at; here there are more than sixty!

In the verse no one is present, although the sight of the night sky is made sense of by an implied human consciousness, witnessing a distant scene of which he is not part. The prose gloss, on the other hand, makes everything explicit.

So are the glosses no more than gentle parody of those readers who found his poem impenetrable and proposed reductive readings? Or could it be that the glosses draw our attention to the endlessly receding exegetical process? We have the poem, we have the editorial gloss, and we have our own reading of both and the relationship between the two, a further 'gloss'. What we are made keenly aware of is the complexity of words and their capacity to mean. Coleridge was well aware of the Christian exegetical tradition. As Jerome McGann points out in an article entitled 'The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner' (*Critical Enquiry* 8, 35-67), the scriptures were not direct and unmediated revelation but an 'evolved and continuously evolving set of records which include the Church's later glosses and interpretations of the earlier document'. Here there is a close similarity with the ballad as genre. Here is part of the description I gave earlier. The ballad form puts:

the burden of narration on allusive monologue or dialogue, and... avoid[s] editorial comment. This concentration upon the bare essential is precisely the quality that the fallible human memory is likely not only to preserve but also to enhance, for the effort of remembering causes a sloughing-off of what is not strictly relevant. Some of the best of the ballads may have thus been refined in their transmission through people's minds, gaining rather than losing artistic stature.

Of all Coleridge's poems, *The Rime* has been subject to the most interpretive wars. At one end of the spectrum are those that claim that it is the imagery of the poem alone which we should engage with, the super-vivid, spectacular, hallucinatory, nightmarish quality of the figurative language. But at the time of writing, Coleridge was toying with all manner of theological, political and philosophical ideas. As his friend the poet De Quincey claimed, 'Logic the most severe was as inalienable from his modes of thinking as grammar from his language' (Beer, p.147).

In addition, we know that Coleridge draws on a great many other authors in *The Rime*: 'Aeschylus, Boehme, Chaucer, Dante, Bryan Edwards, Falconer, Gower, Herodotus, Iamblichus, Captain James - and so on through the alphabet to Virgil and Gilbert White. The conscious use of books of travel is particularly evident in the earlier sections of the poem, but there are debts of every kind and degree of significance.' (Mays, p. 367).

If the poem is more than a ballad rich in zany mind-blowing imagery, fuelled by opium, what is its more profound significance? Coleridge insisted that it had a moral, one he thought too obvious. In this regard Sir Leslie Stephen's acerbic comment is legendary (Stephen was Virginia Woolf's father): 'The moral, which would apparently be that people who sympathise with a man who shoots an albatross will die in prolonged torture of

thirst, is open to obvious objections'.

There are further problems. Just how reliable is the Mariner as narrator? How much of his experience was a function of delirium? Did the boat really travel, crewless, from the South Seas to the Northern port from which it embarked on its awful journey?

Some critics have dodged the question by asserting that Coleridge's purpose is to assert the unintelligibility of the universe. But, writing in 1797, while preaching as a Unitarian, this seems unlikely.

A Christian interpretation has been popular since the Victorians. Ignoring Irving Babbitt's dig that the Mariner being 'relieved of the burden of his transgression by admiring the colour of water-snakes', Christian exegetics have read the poem as an extended metaphor, or allegory, a re-enactment of the Christian story. Robert Penn Warren's critique, in particular, has achieved privileged status. In his view the shooting of the albatross 'symbolises the Fall, and the Fall has the qualities important here: it is a condition of will, as Coleridge says, "out of time", it is the result of no single human motive.' Auden proposed a similar hypothesis. The albatross, he writes, 'is related to the Dove of the Holy Spirit, and through him to the innocent victim, Christ'.

R. L. Brett comments that "the Mariner rebels against the divine order and is punished by the terrible separation from God which follows upon his deed," later concluding that the "events of the poem show a pattern of what might be called orthodox religious experience', culminating in the lines of the final stanza:

He prayeth best who loveth best,

All things both great and small:

For the dear God, who loveth us,

He made and loveth all.

As a footnote, if these lines strike one as clichéd, or as the French theorist Jacques Derrida might say, have suffered 'wear and tear', it may be because Coleridge's lines inspired the well-known hymn, 'All things bright and beautiful', published in 1848 in Mrs Cecil Alexander's *Hymns for Little Children*:

All things bright and beautiful

All creatures great and small

All things bright and wonderful

The Lord God made them all

Having a prose and a verse 'version', also makes us keenly aware of just how differently prose and poetry function. The ballad is replete with rhetorical or poetic techniques.

Internal Rhyme

Besides end rhyme, Coleridge also uses internal rhyme. Here are some examples:

"Hold off! Unhand me, grey-beard **loon!**"

Eft**soons** his hand dropt he. (lines 11-12)

The ship drove **fast**, loud roared the **blast** (line 49)

And through the **drifts** the snowy **clifts** (line 54)

In mist or **cloud**, on mast or **shroud** (line 75)

"Why look'st thou **so?**" - "With my cross-**bow**

The fair breeze **blew**, the white foam **flew** (line 103)

Inversion:

Instead of the cross, the Albatross

About my neck was hung. (lines 141-142)

Instead of "was hung about my neck."

There passed a weary time... (line 143)

"A weary time passed..."

The naked hulk alongside came (line 195)

Instead of "came alongside."

The effects can add drama - delaying a main verb, or slow the line to add emphasis to, for example, 'weary time...';

Enjambment

.....Coleridge uses enjambment, running the sense of one line of verse to the next:

And now the storm-blast came, **and he**

Was tyrannous and strong (lines 41-42)

And through the drifts **the snowy clifts**

Did send a dismal sheen (lines 55-56)

Instead of the cross, **the Albatross**

About my neck was hung. (lines 141-142)

There passed a weary time. **Each throat**

Was parch'd, and glazed each eye. (lines 143-144)

Figures of Speech.

The poem is rich in figures of speech. Here are some examples:

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Alliteration

By thy long **g**rey **b**eard and **g**littering eye (line 3)

And **l**istens **l**ike a three year child (line 15)

The Wedding-Guest **h**ere **b**eat **h**is **b**reast,

For **h**e **h**eard the loud **b**assoon. (lines 31-32)

The **f**urrow **f**ollowed **f**ree (line 104)

Anaphora, or repetition adds emphasis, rhythm, and, perhaps, produces a hypnotic effect:

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He holds him with his skinny hand,

...

He holds him with his glittering eye - (lines 9 & 13)

Below the kirk, **below the** hill

Below the light-house top. (lines 23-24)

The ice was here, **the ice** was there,

The ice was all around. (line 59-60)

With throats unslaked, **with** black lips baked (line 157)

Without a breeze, **without** a tide (line 169)

Her lips were red, **her** looks were free,

Her locks were yellow as gold:

Her skin was as white as leprosy (lines 190-192)

They groan'd, **they** stirr'd, **they** all uprose,

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Irony: the ultimate irony is this:

Water, water, every where,

And all the boards did shrink ;

Water, water, every where,

Nor any drop to drink. (lines 119-122)

Water is everywhere, but there is none to drink.

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Metaphor

The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast, (line 37)

Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,

And cursed me with his eye. (lines 215-216)

Likening the appearance of the eye to a curse

They coil'd and swam; and every track

Was a flash of golden fire. (lines 281-282)

Likening the wake left by the sea snakes to fire

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Onomatopoeia

It **crack'd** and **growl'd**, and **roar'd** and **howl'd** (line 61)

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Personification

The Sun came up upon the left,

Out of the sea came he!

And he shone bright, and on the right

Went down into the sea. (lines 25-28)

Comparison of the sun to a person

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Simile

The Wedding-Guest stood still,

And listens like a three year child: (lines 14 & 15)

Likening the attentiveness of the Wedding-Guest to the complete attention given by a small child

The bride hath paced into the hall,

Red as a rose is she; (lines 33 & 34)

Likening the beauty of the bride to the beauty of a rose (I'll come back to this in a moment)

It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,

Like noises in a swound! (61 & 62)

Likening the sound of the ice breaking to noises imagined in a swoon (or faint)

Every soul, it passed me by,

Like the whizz of my crossbow! (lines 223-224)

Likening the passing of a soul to the sound of a shot arrow

The sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky

Lay like a load on my weary eye (lines 251-252)

Likening the sky and sea to a weight on the eye

Her beams bemocked the sultry main,

Like April hoar-frost spread (lines 268-269)

Likening the reflected sunbeams to frost

The water, like a witch's oils,

Burnt green, and blue and white. (lines 129-130)

Likening the water to witch's oils

Day after day, day after day,

We stuck, nor breath nor motion;

As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean. (lines 115-118)

Likening the motionless ship and ocean to paintings

Synecdoche, a trope in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa:

The western wave was all a-flame (line 171)

Wave refers to the sea.

I fear thee and thy glittering eye,

His "glittering eye" suggests more than madness; it is also a synecdoche representing his soul, which longs to be released from living death. We talk of eyes as 'windows on the soul'.

I'd like to think about briefly about synecdoche. In an article on the trope in George Meredith's tragicomic novel, *The Egoist* (1879), Daniel Smirlock makes a key point about how it works:

The fact that synecdoche is a figure-that is, a falsification in some sense-and that it is substitutive, implies the existence of some interpretive technique that permits the apprehender of the synecdoche to return to the whole of which he has been given a part. If synecdoche is a valid, a truth-telling technique, and it is governed by a whole that nevertheless disappears entirely in the figurative substitution, then an interpretive act is required to return to the whole that renders the part significant. Prior to interpretation, the synecdoche merely stands for the whole; the interpreter must make it mean the whole. (Daniel Smirlock, 'Rough Truth: Synecdoche and

Interpretation in *The Egoist*, *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Vol. 31 No. 3, Dec., 1976; (pp. 313-328)

Now this is where the editorial glosses might come in, explaining the *meaning* of synecdoche.

But if we look at the glosses for the two aforementioned uses of synecdoche, we find no marginal note at all for the first, 'The western wave...', and this for the second: 'But the ancient Mariner assureth him of his bodily life, and proceedeth to relate his horrible penance'. Nothing to fill out the Mariner's 'glittering eye'.

Simile is equally important in the poem. Let's define simile loosely in terms of its form. It is a comparative strategy usually introduced by "like," "as," or "just as... so". The important implication of this is that a simile, though it cannot actually express identity or opposites, can express an infinite number of degrees of likeness or unlikeness. As Addison rightly points out in her article Catherine Addison, 'From Literal to Figurative: An Introduction to the Study of Simile' (*College English*, Vol. 55, No. 4, Apr., 1993, pp. 402-419), 'the world of simile is a familiar one to the non-analytic or impressionistic eye; it is a world in which things are not simply "the same" or "the opposite," but similar-or dissimilar-in infinitely subtle ways. In it, things may "be like" or they may merely "seem like" one another, depending on whether perception and knowledge are in harmony or at odds. In the same way that "like" and "seems like" shade into each other, so "as" modulates with "as if," a copula which extends perception and knowledge into the realms of the hypothetical, the imaginative, and the fantastic.'

And this understanding of simile surely explains the power of the trope as exploited by Coleridge in the *Rime*.

Take these lines, lines 3 and 4 of the sixth stanza of Part IV:

A wicked whisper came, and made

My heart as dry as dust.

What do we make of the simile? That his heart is dry because of the absence of blood? The Mariner is surrounded by the dead crew and the curse in the dead men's eye is upon him. In the context a number of allusions might be suggested. '**Ashes to ashes and dust to dust**' derives from the English Burial Service. The text of that service is adapted from the **Biblical** text, Genesis 3:19 (King James Version): In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for **dust** thou art, and unto **dust** shalt thou return.

And there is irony in the idea of dryness – in the middle of the ocean. And a dry heart, a bloodless heart, is of course lifeless. The simile also ties in with a number of images of desiccation elsewhere in the poem.

Similes do not clarify, any more than the glosses clarify. They add to and enrich a powerfully allusive poem. The poetic language of the *Rime*, its reliance on rhetorical figures such as simile and synecdoche, contribute to the poem's powerfully allusive qualities. The poem, as Addison writes of the trope of simile itself, 'resists the reduction of its great wash of shades and tones to the distinct atoms of sameness and difference.' And the gloss too, fails to reduce the poem – rather it further complicates the reader's interpretive challenge and further elicits the 'attentiveness' that Coleridge believed to be such an important part of engaging with poetry.

To end, I'd also like to suggest yet another complicating factor when it comes to the poem's interpretation. The vividness of the poem's images has inspired a number of artists to create illustrations. Gustave Doré's illustrations of 1878 are powerfully imaginative and probably the best known.

Here are some of my favourites:

The ice was all around

I shot the albatross

Water, water

Doré's illustrations were hugely popular in Victorian Britain but sometimes their literalness can leave one disappointed.

In 1942 Mervyn Peake began a sequence. He was in hospital having been invalided out of the army and described attempts to cure his 'neurosis' to his publisher at Chatto and Windus. Harold Raymond had the brilliant idea of suggesting that he illustrate the poem. He produced extraordinary, startling, heavily-hatched drawings. One, 'the leprous lady' was deemed too startling for the edition and was dropped. Here she is:

And here is the climax of the poem, the shooting of the albatross:

Peake's more abstract and mysterious drawings capture more faithfully the wonderful fluidity of Coleridge's imagery, underpinned, above all by his use of figurative language.

They are in harmony with Coleridge's brilliant definition of imagination:

'The primary imagination I hold to be 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.' (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, chapter 13, 'On Imagination')

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