THE MORAL OF THE ANCIENT MARINER RECONSIDERED

FEW lines written by Coleridge are more familiar than those near the end of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things, both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

And perhaps no lines in his poetry have served as the starting point of so much critical discussion. For the “moral” of the *Ancient Mariner* has been attacked, defended, denied, affirmed many times since Mrs. Barbauld first raised the question and Coleridge answered her. In his *Table Talk* for May 31, 1830, the poet says:

Mrs. Barbauld once told me that she admired the *Ancient Mariner* very much, but that there were two faults in it—it was improbable and had no moral. As for the probability, I owned that that might admit some question; but as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination. It ought to have had no more moral than the *Arabian Nights*’ tale of the merchant’s sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up, and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant, *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie’s son.

The fact that Mrs. Barbauld objected to the improbability of the poem vitiates to a great degree her judgment on its ethical value. Although she was held in reverence and esteem by many of her contemporaries, her pious didacticism and her insistence upon fact roused the ire of at least one of them. In a letter to Coleridge written October 23, 1802, Charles Lamb inveighs against “Mrs. Barbauld’s stuff,” “Mrs. Barbauld’s and Mrs. Trimmer’s nonsense,” “Knowledge insignificant and vapid as Mrs. Barbauld’s books convey,” which have “banished all the old classics of the nursery,” so that “science has succeeded to poetry no less in the little walks of children than with men.” He cries to the author of the *Ancient Mariner*:

Think what you would have been now, if, instead of being fed with tales and old wives’ fables in childhood, you had been crammed with geography and nat-

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1 The most recent affirmation is that by Newton P. Stallknecht: “The Moral of the *Ancient Mariner*,” *PMLA*, xlvi, 559–569. For a discussion of his theory, see below.
ural history! Hang them!—I mean the cursed Barbauld crew, those blights and blasts of all that is human in man and child.

It was certainly with his tongue in his cheek that Coleridge replied to Mrs. Barbauld: “As for the probability, I owned that that might admit some question.” It is very likely that her objection to the lack of moral drove him to an extreme statement of the opposite position. William Blake, Robert Browning, and Robert Frost have all been known to respond with exaggerated seriousness to the comments or the questions of earnest and literal-minded inquirers. However that may be, two facts are apparent: Coleridge never removed that “obtrusive” moral sentiment; and ever since there have been Mrs. Barbaulds and Coleridges (solemnly taking up his mock-solemn argument) among the critics.

Moreover, it is also clear that Mrs. Barbauld and Coleridge were speaking of two different things. She was certainly ignoring the stanza at the close of the poem and concentrating her attention upon the relation between the Mariner’s crime and his punishment; whereas he was probably thinking of that stanza in protesting the “obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader.” Moral sentiment cannot be said to be obtruded openly elsewhere in the poem. The whole matter of the moral of the Ancient Mariner has, through these years, fallen into two parts, two questions: First, is there any moral justification for the retribution which overtook the Mariner and his companions? Second, is the much-quoted stanza an integral part of the poem, justified on artistic grounds, or is it a sentimental, a childish, a conventional moral, a mere excrescence on a work of pure imagination?

The first of these questions has been answered by admirers of the poem far more satisfactorily than the second. Yet the indictment against Coleridge on the first count has by no means been quashed. So distinguished a scholar and critic as Professor Lane Cooper a few years ago in commenting on Professor John Livingston Lowes’ The Road to Xanadu upheld, as is most natural in a man of his Aristotelian bent, Wordsworth’s strictures upon the character of the “old Navigator” and the structure of the poem, and attacked as hideous the moral implications of the story of the consequences resulting from the Mariner’s crime. Professor Lowes has the better of the argument there. But even he dismisses “He prayeth best, who loveth best” as “the Mariner’s valedictory piety, which does, I fear, warrant Coleridge’s (and our own) regret.” Yet the second question, too, can be and should be answered in Coleridge’s favor and on what appear to be more substantial grounds than have ever been ad-

3 “Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Mr. Lowes,” PMLA, XLIII (1928), 582–592.
advanced by his defenders,—yet more simply. Since the two questions are very closely related, it will be well to review the main points in the controversy, though the case for the defense on the first point has been put once and for all by Mr. Lowes in *The Road to Xanadu*.

The story of the poem, he says, is one of the train of cause and consequence, often to be seen in actual life. You do a foolish or a wicked deed, the consequences come home to you and to others. "You repent, and a load is lifted from your soul." But you have not escaped your deed; "life to the end may be the continued reaping of the repented deed's results." This law of real life is transformed by art, working through illusion, into the sequence of cause and consequence which is the story of the *Ancient Mariner*. But the poem is not didactic in intention. Coleridge is merely trying to give "coherence and inner congruity to the dreamlike fabric of an imagined world." The truths incorporated in this dreamlike fabric have, therefore, lost their didactic value. "For the 'moral' of the poem, outside the poem, will not hold water. . . . [C]onsequence and cause, in terms of the world of reality, are ridiculously incommensurable."

Mr. Lowes thus justifies what has seemed to many critics the monstrous result of the thoughtless killing of the albatross, and with one argument disposes of the objections to the "morality" of the Mariner's story and the criticisms of its structure. Leslie Stephen said, "Indeed, 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." And Irving Babbitt wrote that it is "impossible to extract any serious ethical purport from 'The Ancient Mariner'—except perhaps a warning as to the fate of the innocent bystander; unless indeed one holds that it is fitting that, for having sympathized with the man who shot an albatross, 'four times fifty living men' should perish in torments unspeakable." But, as Mr. Lowes has pointed out, these consequences, which would be hideous in real life, are quite justifiable within the limits of a dream world where a "law of life" may be reflected, but in a strange and distorted way.

If we needed it, there is plenty of evidence that Coleridge intended the poem to partake of the characteristics of a dream, and that his contemporaries recognized that intention. De Quincey tells us:8

It is very possible, from something which Coleridge said on another occasion, that, before meeting a fable in which to embody his ideas, he had meditated a

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9 "Coleridge and the Moderns," *Bookman*, lxx (1929), 120.

poem on delirium, confounding its own dream-scenery with external things, and connected with the imagery of high latitudes.

Hazlitt, in his first Lecture on the Comic Writers, says:11

In this condemnation of the serious parts of the Arabian Nights, I have nearly all the world, and in particular the author of the Ancient Mariner, against me, who must be allowed to be a judge of such matters, and who said, with a subtlety of philosophical conjecture which he alone possesses, “That if I did not like them, it was because I did not dream.”

And again, in writing of the Ancient Mariner itself, “his most remarkable performance,” he says:12

It is high German, however, and in it he seems to “conceive of poetry but as a drunken dream, reckless, careless, and heedless, of past, present, and to come.”

Coleridge himself, in the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads, added to his poem as a subtitle “A Poet’s Reverie,” a sop, as Mr. Lowes suggests, to the Cerberus of Wordsworth and the Mrs. Barbaulds. But as Lamb saw,13 and as Mr. Lowes has pointed out,14 the Ancient Mariner is emphatically not a revery, although it may be a dream. The structure of the story, within the limits of the dream world, is too closely knit to warrant such a name. But it is necessary to realize that this structure is determined by the dream quality, that its “inconsequence is the dream’s irrelevance.”15

There have been many critics, both contemporary with Coleridge and later, who have failed to realize this. In 1799 the Monthly Review16 said that the Ancient Mariner “is the strangest story of a cock and a bull that we ever saw on paper,” admitting that there were exquisite poetical touches in it, “though it seems a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence, (of which we do not perceive the drift, unless the joke lies in depriving the wedding guest of his share of the feast),” and twenty years later, in reviewing Sibylline Leaves,17 speaks of the “general nonsense” of the Ancient Mariner. It is well known that Wordsworth said, “The events having no necessary consequence do not produce each other.” To this Mr. Lowes has replied, “The events in a dream do not produce each other, but they seem to.”18 But it was not only the older critics whom Mr. Lowes had to answer. Georg Brandes, writing in 1875 on “Naturalism in England,” having given voice to the familiar protest against the morality of the Mariner’s story, says, “Modern criticism would willingly excuse the absence of any moral in the ballad if it could

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15 Ibid., p. 303.
16 Ibid., p. 303.
17 LXXXVIII, 34.
18 Second Series, xxix, 204.
find a poetic central idea in it." He compares it with Hartmann’s *Der Camao*, in which the killing of a bird is followed by natural results. The *Ancient Mariner*, he maintains, like *Christabel*, is childish and undeserving of much attention by Danish critics. It is this very childishness, or, as he prefers to call it, naïveté, upon which Professor Gingerich bases his justification of both the morality and the structure of the Mariner’s story. The Mariner, like Coleridge himself at this period, is a true necessitarian, acted upon, as Wordsworth said, not acting. He is childlike, utterly simple and naïve in language, especially in such passages as the familiar stanza at the end, which—

expresses, with artistic grace, the sum of the mariner’s religious wisdom. The poem, in short, is the most superb example of sustained naïveté in the language. . . . [The] mariner’s ethics is that of a child. He killed the bird impulsively and wantonly. But when his fellow mariners attributed their fate and the fate of their ship, whether for good or evil, but chiefly for evil, to the killing of the albatross, and accounted the act a crime, he accepted without question their verdict; and straightway the crime became to him monstrous and overwhelming.

Like a child he suffers out of all proportion to the deed when made to feel that the deed is outrageous. All the punishment is thus interpreted as a figment of the Mariner’s own imagination, inflamed by a guilty conscience and the accusations of his companions. Thus he is a necessitarian. He is also a Unitarian. Love eventually overcomes Loneliness, its opposing force. The first evidence of this all-embracing love is in the blessing of the water-snakes. It then moves in ever-widening circles to embrace all living things, “causing him in particular to declare our universal human religious fellowship.” So the childishness and incoherence that moved Mr. Brandes to scorn become the childlikeness and sustained structure that win the admiration of Mr. Gingerich.

Other critics have endeavored to justify or explain the structure and moral of the entire poem by interpreting it as an allegory. To A. W. Crawford it was an allegory of man’s spiritual experience and a criticism of the church of Coleridge’s own day. To others the allegory seems definitely autobiographical. Stopford Brooke said that the Mariner and Coleridge were alike, that at the end both “came home at last and found peace in simple faith in God, in childlike humility, in mercy and love of man, and in reverence for all things.” And Hugh I’Anson Fausset said:

20 “From Necessity to Transcendentalism in Coleridge,” *PMLA*, xxxv (1920), 1-59.
The Moral of the "Ancient Mariner" Reconsidered

It was no mere miracle of inventive fantasy, but an involuntary but inevitable projection into imagery of his own inner discord. The Mariner's sin against Nature in shooting the Albatross imaged his own morbid divorce from the physical: and the poem was therefore moral in its essence, in its implicit recognition of creative values and of the spiritual death which dogs their frustration.

Imagination can only be moral in this ultimate sense, and the explicit moral inserted at the end of the poem was a descent from the pure imaginative level. Coleridge knew . . . how often his dreams were vague and disorganic, how insecurely he lived beyond good and evil. And so, as 'The Ancient Mariner' drew to a close, his fears returned. Had he been after all a mere romancer? Was the illusion, which he had achieved, true or false, arbitrary or necessary? Troubled, as he always was in his passive moments, with the sense of a vital moral obligation which he could not meet, he concluded his poem, as he was to conclude his life, with a conventional one.

Professor Newton P. Stallknecht, whose article "The Moral of the Ancient Mariner" is the most recent discussion of the subject, finds in the poem an allegory of the anti-Godwinian reaction from the abuse of reason to the use of love through which both Coleridge and Wordsworth passed, and which Wordsworth recorded in the last books of The Prelude. The shooting of the Albatross is a "symbol of reason's conquest of feeling," which is followed by dreadful spiritual isolation—Life-in-Death. But the Mariner's "kind saint" (imaginative love of Nature) takes pity on him, he blesses the watersnakes and finds himself again able to pray.

But his penance and suffering are not over, for he has not as yet recovered his love and understanding of man . . . The pious Hermit alone has the power to shrive the Mariner . . . We may find a possible interpretation of the Hermit in the idea of an enlightened religion which is acquainted with the life of the spirit and aware of the difficulties which beset it.

And so he brings the Mariner to the complete experience of love, love in "its romantic meaning," widened "into a more humane and a more religious sentiment," which embraces human beings and "is sustained by a mystical sense of communion." Therefore "He prayeth best, who loveth best."

All these explanations seem over-elaborate. Without calling the poem childish with Mr. Brandes or even childlike with Mr. Gingerich, we may recognize it as a work of pure imagination with Mr. Lowes and at the same time justify the structure of the entire poem, including the familiar moral, without being forced into the difficulties and subtleties of allegorical interpretation. To take the latest explanation, Professor Stallknecht seems to be exercising purely subjective criticism, to be reading into the poem more than is there. He admits that the poem was probably

26 PMLA, XLVII (1932), 559–569.  
28 Ibid., pp. 566–567.
begun with no allegorical intention, that the allegory enters late and is obscure, and that portions even of the later divisions of the poem may not be allegorical at all. Yet he would have us believe that with the introduction of the figure of Life-in-Death the Mariner suddenly becomes no longer a simple Mariner but a Godwinian in the process of reformation, a nautical Marmaduke, and the Hermit is not a simple Hermit but a symbol of enlightened religion. Retroactively the killing of the Albatross becomes "the symbol of reason's conquest of feeling." There is, of course, little doubt that Coleridge passed through very much the same spiritual experience as Wordsworth, or that they were thinking and feeling along the same lines during those years when they were in close association with each other. It needs no allegorical interpretation of the *Ancient Mariner* to demonstrate this. These facts, however, do not necessarily mean that Coleridge seized upon the story of the *Ancient Mariner*, whether at the beginning or in the middle, as a vehicle for the recording of that experience and those ideas. In view of Coleridge's account of the inception of the *Ancient Mariner*, and of Wordsworth's comments upon its lack of ethical consequence, and in the absence of any later explanation of its meaning by Coleridge or any recognition of the presence of allegory by Wordsworth or anyone else associated with Coleridge, is not a simple explanation, which makes of the poem a unit, artistically and intellectually, more reasonable? After all, any story of sin and repentance, Godwinian or not, would follow these general lines, and a theme in consonance with the general humanitarian attitude of the period is the most natural thing in the world—especially the romantic world. It scarcely seems necessary to interpret—and retroactively at that—the apparently wilful, unpremeditated act of the shooting of the Albatross as "the abuse of reason."

The question remains, therefore, whether it is possible to find a simple explanation of the poem which may both justify the morality of the Mariner's own experience and demonstrate the integral union between the story of that experience and the so-called "moral" at the end of the poem. Mr. Lowes, in the passage already referred to, has offered the most convincing and the simplest explanation of the relation between the

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29 Coleridge's later philosophical ideas involved a recognition of the influence of "providences" upon the noumenon, the action, leading to something analogous to spiritual regeneration, upon the will "by the will of others, nay even by nature, by the breeze, the sunshine, by the tender life and freshness of the sensation of convalescence, by shocks of sickness" (see Muirhead, John H., *Coleridge as Philosopher* [New York: Macmillan, 1930], pp. 249–250), and of the result of regeneration as a state in which "the person is capable of a quickening intercommunion with the Divine Spirit." (*Aids to Reflection: Aphorisms on that which is indeed Spiritual Religion.*)
Mariner's sin and his punishment—that the whole story takes place in a dream world, where cause and consequence are not controlled by the laws of reality. Yet he finds the stanza, "He prayeth best . . . ," an excrescence, an obtrusive moral, "the Mariner's valedictory piety." It seems possible, however, on the basis of Mr. Lowes' own theory, to demonstrate that that stanza is no excrescence, no matter for regret.

Coleridge himself was amused by the perturbation of his contemporaries, like Wordsworth and Lamb, over what they considered the faulty structure of his poem. Joseph Cottle quotes Coleridge's own epigram from the Morning Post:30

TO THE AUTHOR OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

Your Poem must eternal be,
Dear Sir, it cannot fail,
For 'tis incomprehensible,
And without head or tail.

He also quotes from a letter from Coleridge, probably written in 1807:31

The common end of all narrative, nay, of all poems is, to convert a series into a whole, to make those events, which, in real, or imagined history, move on in a straight line, assume to our understandings a circular motion—the snake with its tail in its mouth.

Has, then, this snake a head and a tail? Is its tail in its mouth? Or is the "moral" no organic tail at all, but a mere papier-maché appendage like the tail of a stage dragon?

The Ancient Mariner, as I see it, has a very real and healthy tail, securely held in the jaws of an equally real and healthy head. "The Mariner's valedictory piety" belongs at the end of the poem because it is an integral part of that very plan and form which Professor Lowes emphasizes in his discussion. The story of the Mariner's voyage is a dream and has a dreamlike quality. But the whole poem is not a dream. It begins with reality,—the wedding, the wedding-guests, the Mariner's "own countree." Reality drops away as the ship drops

Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top,

though it recurs a few times—the bride, red as a rose, pacing into the hall behind the nodding minstrelsy—before the Wedding-Guest is wholly under the spell of the dream. In the dream world the Albatross is killed and all the inconsequent consequences follow. At the end of the poem we return:

Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed
The lighthouse top I see?
Is this the hill? is this the kirk?
Is this mine own countree?

We drifted o'er the harbour-bar,
And I with sobs did pray—
O let me be awake, my God!
Or let me sleep alway.

Although we do not yet wake entirely, the dream fades, and we, with the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, are back in reality, but a reality haunted by the dream. Then comes the moral of the whole poem:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things, both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

Coleridge said that the poem should have no more moral than one of the *Arabian Nights*. Nor should the dream-story have, if that were the entire poem. But there is the Wedding-Guest, who has been strangely neglected in all the discussions of the poem. He stands at the beginning and the end. If he were to serve no better structural purpose than merely to act as an ear to hear the Mariner's story, he might better not be there at all. He is, however, a representative of the world of human beings, a man to be influenced and affected by the Mariner's story, "the man that must hear me." John Charpentier says:32

At bottom, Coleridge remained convinced that poetry should never be at the pains to prove anything, and should never aim at edification. It may, however, soothe the anxious soul, and through the musing mood it induces, lead to some guiding rule of conduct.

How, then, is the Wedding-Guest to be affected? He rose the next morning a sadder (that is, a more serious) and a wiser man. What was his acquired wisdom? Certainly he never said to his two companions whom the Mariner did not stop, "That old Navigator who kept me from the wedding taught me that I must never shoot an albatross; for if I do, two hundred of my companions will die a horrible death and I, even though I repent, shall be held by Life-in-Death and shall be like the Wandering Jew." Such "wisdom" would be nonsense. At best it would be a negative kind of philosophy. The wisdom gained by the Wedding-Guest is of a positive kind: Love for one's fellow-creatures is a positive

blessing and will bring one into closer communion with the God of Na-
ture than any other virtue. A fox-hunting man might have a nightmare
of giant spectre foxes and disaster for himself and his fellow-huntsmen.
The morrow morn he would not refrain from the chase for fear of vulpine
vengeance; but he might well conclude that without his gun he would
have a better chance of enjoying the woods and the fields, of “praying,”
of entering into sympathetic union with the spirit that dwells there.
An analogous bit of wisdom was embodied a few years ago by George
Kaufman and Marc Connelly in the play, Beggar on Horseback. The
young composer, when he awoke from his dream, did not believe that,
if he married for money, he would dance down the aisle to the tune of
“The Frog’s Party” with a bride who carried a bouquet of bank notes,
or that he would be condemned to work in the Cady Consolidated Art
Factory. But he was very positively convinced by his dream experience
of the wisdom and value of love and symphonies in a cottage.

As Oliver Elton wisely says, Coleridge was not “concerned with the
prevention of cruelty to albatrosses.” But he was influenced by the
general humanitarian feeling of the period (even to the point of calling
the young ass his brother), and he believed, as he says in Frost at Mid-
night, that God spoke through all his creatures. So the “moral” of the
Ancient Mariner proves to be a simple expression of the effect which a
horrible dream experience had upon Mariner and Wedding-Guest, of the
very natural resultant waking wisdom. We may offer it as an example,
then, of Lamb’s comment to Southey, and may quote that comment,
turning it to our own purposes, with as much “joy” as does Professor
Lowes:

A moral should be wrought into the body and soul, the matter and tendency, of
a poem, not tagged to the end, like a ‘God send the good ship into harbour,’ at
the conclusion of our bills of lading.

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84 Lowes, op. cit., p. 302 n.
85 March 15, 1799, Letters, 1, 112.