

THE ETHICS OF "THE ANCIENT MARINER"

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MR. Lowes has warned us against the "stultifying" effect of "interpreting the drift of *The Ancient Mariner* as didactic in its intention"; he goes even further, and asserts that "the 'moral' of the poem, *outside the poem*, will not hold water." But Mr. Lowes confesses, also, that he "regrets" "the Mariner's valedictory piety," and even quotes Coleridge when the latter said, "As to the want of a moral, (in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), 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 action*¹ in a work of such pure imagination." It would appear, therefore, on the authority of the author, and, indeed, on the authority of Mr. Lowes also, that the real problem is no longer one of "moral intention", but rather one of ascertaining precisely what the moral lesson is. Or, to adopt Mr. Lowes's own vivacious phraseology, it would appear that on occasion it may be necessary to accept both a moral with our poetry and bread and butter with our tea, if our poet or hostess offer them, much as we might prefer the more delicate flavour of the poetry or of the beverage alone.

In undertaking such an approach, however, it is first necessary to emphasize the distinction between "historical" and "philosophical", or "poetical", truth. Such a distinction is, of course, at least as old as Aristotle, and has for its validation the assumption that, to an intelligent being, the action which seems to take place with some objective integrity, within the categories of time and of space, is, normally, less compelling than the purely hypothetical action, postulated to explain rationally a series of apparently recurrent, and largely sensuous, experiences. In the interests of truth, final and independent, "probable impossibilities" are to be preferred before "improbable possibilities." It entails the intellectual recognition of the fact that the normal, the perfect, the "ideal"—call it what you will—exists, actually, only in the realm of the intellect, and is based upon, and surrounded by, a variety of irregularities,

1. The italics are, of course, my own.

aberrations, and eccentricities, which occur from time to time in the realm of simple experience and are themselves the differentia of simple experiences. The former is "philosophically", and indeed "poetically", true; the latter have only "historical" integrity.

It is to the realm of "philosophical" and "poetical" truth that moral principles belong. Because they *are* principles, they transcend the phenomena of sensuous experience, even though based, originally, upon experience itself. Such principles enter into the realm of sensuous experience again—and, even then, merely hypothetically—through the medium of concrete example and particular application. Example and application *may* be "historically" authentic, but are not *necessarily* so. Indeed, there is at least one advantage in formulating purely hypothetical instances; for simply because they are hypothetical, they can be the simpler, the more flexible, and therefore, the more pertinent, all that is irrelevant or contradictory in the "historical" being readily expunged or composed in the fictitious. In this way, they can be, in the strictest sense, "truer" than the merely "historical" example, with its inevitably particular characteristics. What is lacking in historical cogency is more than made up by the more fundamental and permanent truth of philosophy and of poetry, and also, therefore, by the widened field of potential application.

Consequently, when Mr. Lowes asserts that "the 'moral' of the poem, *outside the poem*, will not hold water", it would appear that he may be, in fact, simply pointing out that the story of the Mariner cannot be reduced to terms of bare "historical" data, which, of course, is obvious. In other words, the fundamental, and essentially moral, design of the poem has not been wrought out in a mere "historical" fabric. But once the essentially moral tone of the work is recognized, the fictitious character of the specific illustration serves to render it only the more compelling, making possible, as it does, the substitution of moral principle for simple, "historical" fact, and so promoting the enunciation of a theory, potentially of universal application. Within and without the poem, the moral "holds water"; for it is more fundamental than a specific poem, and more logical than the merely chronological concatenation of events and experiences.

Beyond this, it is necessary to examine the simple theory of morality thus enunciated. Mr. Lowes states that in *The Ancient Mariner* "Coleridge is not intent on teaching. . . that what a

man soweth, that shall he also reap." Obviously he is not. His thesis is, rather,

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast

or more positively,

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

What Coleridge *is* bent upon demonstrating, whether consciously or unconsciously, is that the whole universe, animate and, I suspect, inanimate, spiritual and material, is, or ought to be, permeated by a spirit of sympathetic charity, which flows from and includes, a Supreme Being, who created and now sustains all things. Sin, therefore, comes to be any abrogation, whether in fact or in desire, of the ideal, affectionate bond. It is pure selfishness, and entails as its logical consequence a degree of simple isolation, which is, of course, spiritual death. Such isolation separates the offender from his fellows, from the universe, and from the Creator, and is more or less complete in direct proportion to the actual moral state of the individual, though that state is made apparent and attested by conduct.

With these elementary principles before us, it is possible to trace a logical moral sequence throughout the poem. The first significant lines are these:

As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.

Up to this point the voyage has been strenuous, but not unpleasant. All has gone forward harmoniously, which is, from the moral standpoint, lovingly, with no searching moral issue emerging. With the arrival of the albatross, however, a moral issue does emerge. According to the moral thesis, the bird is as much a member of the universe as are the seamen. It is, therefore, entitled to the same considerations as those which the crew enjoy at the hand of the Creator and offer to one another. The response is, at first, a sympathetic one. The albatross is hailed and fed, "in the name of God." The voyage, therefore, proceeds even the more harmoniously. The spirit of love has been vindicated and sustained, and for the sailors the universe is one in essence with the Creator.

It is the fate of the Ancient Mariner to destroy the harmonious relationship. To ask why, does not seem to be a legitimate question. It appears to involve the whole problem of the origin of evil, of which no satisfactory solution has yet been put forward. The Mariner kills the albatross. Mr. Lowes considers the offence a trivial one, and finds the ensuing events, "*in terms of the world of reality . . . ridiculously incommensurable.*" He seems to suggest that the killing of a man would have been more serious, though, in the latter circumstances, he points out that there could have been no poem. The enormity of the immoral act, however, does not lie in the act itself or even in its consequences. The immoral act is important and serious because it is evidence of the moral state of the actor, the moral state which makes such conduct possible. Here, therefore, the very slightest action can be profoundly and alarmingly important. It can indicate that the actor has been in spirit, and now is in fact, out of harmony with, and therefore isolated from, the spirit of universal charity from which he, together with all things, draws his very life. In particular circumstances the killing of an albatross, or even of a man, may be justified, even on moral grounds. On occasion, society will condone either or both. According to the theory of the poem, however, it never can be justified to kill *wantonly* either a man or a bird. In fact, it may be affirmed with some degree of assurance that the one who would *wantonly* destroy an albatross, or any other of the lesser creatures, in other circumstances, and with the fear of judicial and social consequences removed (that is, with the issue made a simple moral one), would quite as *wantonly* destroy a human being. It is only because we consistently confuse crime with sin that the killing of a man seems to be more serious than the killing of an albatross. Indeed, for this reason, Coleridge showed consummate wisdom in selecting for his purpose an action which could not be confounded with mere crime, as homicide would have been confounded.

Far from being trivial, therefore, the action of the Mariner is of primary importance. It indicates that the Mariner is in a desperate condition morally. Indeed, if terms of Christian orthodoxy be invoked, he may be said to have come very close to the commission of the "unpardonable sin", which, it will be remembered, is not a sin that cannot be forgiven, but, rather, a sin which indicates that the sinner cannot even desire forgiveness. The consequences which follow upon the killing of the albatross, then, are not to be styled "ridiculously incommensurable."

No consequences, however serious, can be "incommensurable" with the nature of the offence, viewed, as it should be, as evidence of an almost atrophied moral condition.

As soon as the albatross is slain, the rest of the crew cry out against the outrage. Their protest would be both moral and commendable, did it spring from any generous impulse. It rises, however, only from a selfish and guilty fear of consequences (namely, that the favourable wind may cease to blow), and so becomes at once a confession and a condemnation. When the breeze does not fail immediately, this negatively immoral attitude becomes positively immoral, and the selfish act of the Ancient Mariner is condoned and even commended. The seamen indicate, thus, that they are, potentially, exactly what the Ancient Mariner is in fact, and so become liable to penalties similar to that to which the Ancient Mariner is liable.

At this point a discrepancy emerges. According to the moral theory of the poem, which is identical with the moral theory enunciated by Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, the sinful act and the sinful desire are equally heinous, and are to be followed by the same consequences. Mariner and crew, therefore, should suffer in the same way. It is clear, however, that except for an occasional moral or religious genius, mankind will never even understand, let alone practise, such an exalted moral code. There will always be a distinction made between the immoral act and the immoral desire. It will always *seem* worse to murder than to hate, to commit adultery than to lust. Accordingly, it is natural, though inconsistent, that the poet should make a distinction between the consequences as they fall on the Ancient Mariner, the sinner in fact, and as they fall on the rest of the crew, the sinners in desire.

Coleridge is consistent, however, in that in strict harmony with the simple moral theory of the poem, in both cases, he presents consequences in different forms of the fundamental, and logically inevitable, fact of death. For the crew it is nothing more than mere physical disintegration—"they fled to bliss or woe"—while for the Ancient Mariner the morally more shocking experience of spiritual isolation—Life-in-Death—becomes an appalling reality. The subjective, internal fact of the moral loneliness of selfishness is now simply wrought out objectively and externally within the categories of time and of space.

Now, had the Ancient Mariner been entirely impervious to moral influence, it is obvious that he would have been unconscious of his isolation; but it is the source at once of his

suffering and of his hope that he is still able to recognize the loneliness of his position:

The many men, so beautiful,
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.

This ability to distinguish between the beauty of other creatures and his own slimy moral condition augurs well for eventual redemption. Redemption must always come, logically, along the channel of the precise phase of moral insensibility which has already made possible the uncharitable (sinful) act. That is, since the Mariner failed through selfishness, his salvation must come to him through generosity operating along the exact line along which selfishness had previously operated. It does come thus:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware.

Immediately, and inevitably, the fatal loneliness of selfishness is entirely dissipated, and the Ancient Mariner enters again into sympathetic communion with the rest of the universe—"The self-same moment I could pray."

It might be observed, moreover, that at this point Coleridge touches upon the familiar Reformation doctrine of Divine Grace. It is only the intervention of Divine Grace, through the medium of his patron saint, which makes possible his salvation—"Sure my kind saint took pity on me."

For a second time, this time with Babbitt, Mr. Lowes finds the incident a trivial one, both in itself and in its causal relationship to the redemption of the Mariner. It should now be evident, however, that Coleridge is working within the realm of moral principle, and that within that realm no incident is necessarily trivial. As was the case with the killing of the albatross, rather, the very seeming triviality of the incident makes its moral significance unmistakable and profoundly important. It is not only when man rejoices in the beauty of some noble organism and blesses it in its happiness, that the moral values of sympathy and of charity are made manifest. Such values can reveal themselves in the smallest event, and rarely will it be found that he who loves water-snakes is lacking in that compassionate sympathy which alone enables him to enter into communion with all things. Therefore, the episode of the water-

snakes is of a kind with the killing of the albatross, and from the moral standpoint both are exceedingly important and entirely commensurable with the events which follow.

Though the Ancient Mariner is thus freed from the moral agony of loneliness, consequences, as Mr. Lowes points out, cannot be avoided. Normally, "sanctification" follows upon "conversion", and is marked by the recollection of, and regret for, past sins—not to emphasize the tendency to fall again into the old, immoral attitudes. This fact is adequately indicated in the poem, first by confession, and then by penance. As the Ancient Mariner is drawn from former times, it is natural that the terminology should be the Roman terminology. Behind such ecclesiastical setting, however, it is clear that the work of penance, and hence of sanctification, takes the form of a passion, necessarily wholly unselfish, for the saving of other men from the loneliness of selfishness, by the force of specific warning and personal example. It is a genuinely missionary enthusiasm which compels the Mariner, conscious of his own salvation, to share that salvation with his fellows. Something in the face of an individual—this time it was the wedding-guest—indicates to the zealot that that individual is in danger of cutting himself off from others through the cardinal sin of selfishness, and the heart of the man is in agony until he has done his utmost to warn the unredeemed and to save him from all that he, personally, has suffered—"Since then, at an uncertain hour, That agony returns", "The moment that his face I see, I know the man that must hear me, To him my tale I teach."

I feel confirmed in my opinion that the "drift" of the famous poem is to be interpreted thus as "didactic in its intention", by the fact that Coleridge has, apparently, deliberately introduced into his narrative the unmistakably allegorical, and therefore symbolic, figures, Death and Life-in-Death. It seems incomprehensible to me that these two should have been so named and so described, had they not been definitely intended to have important, abstract significance in a preconceived moral interpretation of the work.