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The Rime of The Ancient Mariner As Epic Symbol

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye refers to the "miniature epic" as the development which occurs "when a lyric on a conventional theme achieves a concentration that expands it into a miniature epic: if not the historical 'little epic' or epyllion, something very like it generically." Frye cites *Lycidas* and Spenser's *Epithalamion*, as well as "the later poems of Eliot, of Edith Sitwell, and many cantos of Pound,"¹ as examples of the genre. I would like to suggest that Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* may profitably be seen as a miniature epic. It is of medium length, and sets out to teach a people something of their own traditions. It employs the supernatural. Also, the action involves a voyage around the world which begins and ends in the same place, more or less as the total action of the *Odyssey* extends from Ithaca to Troy and back to Ithaca, and likewise involves strange sea-adventures.²

Frye also employs the term "epos" to describe works in which the radical of presentation is oral address, and says it "takes in all literature in verse or prose, which makes some attempt to preserve the convention of recitation and a listening audience."³ *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, with its narrating Mariner and Wedding-Guest who "cannot choose but hear," makes an attempt to preserve such a convention, albeit contained within a larger narrative framework. The usual generic designation for the poem is "literary ballad," which means that we know who the poet is, but he is trying to be primitive. *The Ancient Mariner* is thus both literary ballad and miniature epic, narrative and displaced epos.

Like *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, *The Ancient Mariner* has at least part of its setting in the later Middle Ages. The instrument with which the Mariner kills the Albatross, the arbalest or cross-bow, was used chiefly during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and gave way to the

long-bow in the fourteenth century. The poem's Christian context is carefully established by means of the reference to "kirk" in line 23, and by other details, such as "Christian soul," "vespers nine," and "Heaven's Mother," mentioned subsequently in the narrative. So the background of the Mariner's narrative is both mediaeval and Christian.

William Empson suggests that the poem is "about the European maritime expansion," and, in passing, that "The effect on literature of [Europeans'] maritime empires was to make the explorer a symbol of scientific discovery . . . thence of intellectual adventure in general, and at last for the highest event in ethics, the moral discovery, which gets a man called a traitor by his own society."⁴ Since the Mariner's two-hundred shipmates represent his own society, and that society was mediaeval and Christian, it follows that the Mariner as intellectual and moral rebel against that society represents the Renaissance with its new learning, particularly its new science, which was anathema to the old order. Seen in this light, the poem recapitulates a major aspect of European history from the mediaeval to the modern period.

For the Mariner is not simply an explorer; he is discoverer of the Pacific and, if we are to trust the poem's inner dynamics, the world's first circumnavigator. True, we are not told specifically which way the Mariner's ship returned from the Pacific to his own country; nor, for that matter, are we told which way the Mariner's ship got into the Pacific. Bernard Smith, in an article entitled "Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Cook's Second Voyage," argues that the course of the Mariner's journey closely corresponds to that of the *Resolution*, Cook's ship, which circumnavigated the world by proceeding via the southern ice-fields in an eastward direction:

Critics of the *Ancient Mariner* tend to assume that Coleridge intended it to be understood that the Mariner's vessel doubled Cape Horn, the two lines, "the Sun came up upon the left" and "the Sun now rose upon the right" being cited in support. A moment's reflection, however, will make one realize that as soon as the vessel began to move northwards instead of southwards the sun would rise upon the right. . . . Immediately following the lines

The ice did split with a thunder-fit;
The helmsman steered us through!

we have the line

And a good south wind sprung up behind.

Such a wind in the region of the prevailing westerlies would drive a ship eastwards. When this is read in conjunction with the accompanying gloss which tells how the albatross followed the ship "as it returned northwards through fog and floating ice" a more feasible interpretation than the doubling of the Horn is that the vessel is moving into the southern Indian Ocean.⁵

Smith's argument may seem attractive, particularly if one assumes, as he does, that Coleridge was likely to have had a single source in mind for the Mariner's voyage. Against this theory of an eastward circumnavigation, however, is most reader's spontaneous response to the lines

We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea. (105-106)

Lowes observes that these lines echo Sir John Narborough's account of Magellan's entry into the Pacific.⁶ George Shelvocke's *Voyage round the World by the way of the Great South Sea*, whose influence on the poem was first noticed by Wordsworth, also describes a westward circumnavigation. And as for the south wind, there is the frequency of south winds in the neighbourhood of the Antarctic Circle reported by all explorers.⁷

The hypothesis of a westward direction for the Mariner's journey also receives poetic support. For the Romantics, the West was the region of new life and new hope, fraught with infinite possibilities for cosmic renewal or cosmic betrayal. The motif of the westward journey becomes something of an archetype in Romantic poetry, extending as it does from Blake's

To find the Western path
Right thro' the Gates of Wrath

through Wordsworth's *Stepping Westward* to the westward-looking conclusion of Keats's *To My Brother George*, to mention but three of the possible examples. And the Ancient Mariner is "looking westward" when he beholds the spectre-bark, which seems to be coming from unknown and as-yet-unexplored regions.

Moreover, the sense of physical and intellectual daring which permeates the poem and for which spirits as well as mariners are famous seems to require a westward journey and a return route from the Pacific to the Atlantic via the Cape of Good Hope. The gloss which Coleridge added to the 1817 version of the poem helps to make this clear. The

Line, or equator, is mentioned three times, once each in Part I, II, and V, as it would have to be crossed at least twice in a circumnavigational voyage, and was evidently touched once in the Pacific, where the ship was becalmed (ll. 105-114). This is not, as has been suggested, a mistake on Coleridge's part.⁸ Each mention of the Line is accompanied by a description of the vertical sun standing over the mast at noon (ll. 30, 112-113, 383). The absence of any further reference to extreme cold after Part I indicates that the lonesome Spirit from the south-pole carries the ship from the equatorial calm in the Pacific southward around south-east Asia and the Cape of Good Hope, and then northward as far as the Line in the Atlantic, where his jurisdiction ends and the ship is propelled "northward" by angelic power for the remainder of the journey. It is surely more than a mere coincidence that the Polar Spirit's jurisdiction over the Mariner and his vessel ends at the precise point where he has completed his circumnavigation. The poem's structure as miniature epic also seems to require that the Mariner's journey should represent a completed cycle.

The Mariner as the world's first circumnavigator anticipates Magellan. He also anticipates, as has recently been observed, all those subsequent voyages of exploration and discovery by means of which Western European society has sought to imprint its imperial and slave-owning image upon the New World.⁹ But the specific *milieu* of the Mariner's narration is late mediaeval, and he commits a specific crime which places him in violation of that society's code. In the final versions of the poem, at least, it does not appear that the Albatross was slain for food; nor is there any reference to its having been eaten. (Empson, relying on such details as the reference to "biscuit-worms" in earlier versions of the poem, argues that the Albatross was shot for food and eaten.¹⁰ His argument, though plausible, receives no confirmation from the final text, however.) Rather, Coleridge emphasizes the apparent motivelessness of the Mariner's act to make it appear as an act of will standing in violation of both social mores (the sailors' taboo, which Coleridge may have invented¹¹) and extrinsic reason. The Mariner's sin against the Holy Ghost, or Spirit of Love, is parallel to the displacement of Love by logic as the *raison d'être* of the cosmos, a displacement which began during the Renaissance with the discoveries not only of Columbus and Magellan, but also those of Galileo and Kepler.

The instrument with which the Mariner commits his crime, the cross-bow, serves a dual function in that it helps to place the Mariner's narration within its mediaeval context and also, as an instrument of mechanical precision, anticipates those technological changes which revolutionized European society during the following centuries. No doubt it also bears an ironic relation to the cross of Christianity. The spirit of mankind, or so it seemed to the Romantics, was becoming crucified upon a cross of technology. Another instrument of precision referred to in the poem's imagery is the plumb-line: after the Mariner spontaneously blesses the water-snakes, "The Albatross fell off, and sank/Like lead into the sea" (209-291). And after the circumnavigational voyage is completed, "The ship went down like lead" (549). The mysterious motion of the ship, while intended to be supernatural in origin, also has technological overtones. Specifically, the motion without wind described in Part VI of the poem suggests not so much nautical, as aeronautical motion:

FIRST VOICE

'But why drives on that ship so fast,
Without or wave or wind?'

SECOND VOICE

'The air is cut away before
And closes from behind.' (422-425)

As the gloss puts it, "the angelic power causeth the vessel to drive northward faster than human life could endure." The Mariner's voyage is thus not only a voyage through space, but a voyage through time as well. For better or worse, he emerges as the first modern man.

Indeed, there are strong hints that the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance has already been effected between the time when the Mariner made his voyage and the time when he narrates it to the Wedding-Guest:

We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea. (105-106)

The statement that the Mariner and his companions were the first suggests that others have since duplicated the feat. The Mariner's story, as we have seen, is pre-Magellan and mediaeval in setting; its narration to the Wedding-Guest is post-Magellan. The bassoon, the sound of which interrupts the Mariner's narration (1. 32), was invented in the sixteenth

century. Thus, an interval of at least two hundred years has elapsed between the time when the Mariner set out on his voyage and the time when he narrates it to the Wedding-Guest. This is a consideration the importance of which has not been sufficiently appreciated. It means that the poem embodies in its very structure that transition from the mediaeval to the modern world which also constitutes a major aspect of its theme.

The Mariner's attempt to return to the old dispensation, symbolized by the kirk and by the Mariner's concluding advice to the Wedding-Guest, is only partially successful. It is an attempt which finds its parallel in the cry of "Back to the Middle Ages" which reverberates through the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century, particularly among members of the younger generation. But the Mariner's circumnavigation of the earth may also be seen as a symbol of those changes which have taken place since the Renaissance, both in a geopolitical and a technological sense, so that the repentant Mariner may after all be seen as the first lonely inhabitant of the global village.

NOTES

1. *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 324.
2. Karl Kroeber, in "'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' As Stylized Epic," *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, XLVI (1957), 179-187, argues that the poem is a stylized quest epic and compares the Mariner's killing of the Albatross to the slaying of the Sun-God's oxen in the *Odyssey*. The difference between a stylized quest epic and a miniature epic need not detain us.
3. Frye, p. 248.
4. William Empson, "The Ancient Mariner," *Critical Quarterly*, 6 (1964), 318.
5. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XIX (1956), 139-140.
6. John L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (New York, 1959; 1st pub. 1927), p. 120.
7. S. v. "Polar Regions," *Encycl. Brit.*
8. Irene Chayes, in "A Coleridgean Reading of *The Ancient Mariner*," *Studies In Romanticism*, IV, 2 (1965), p. 93, refers to "the apparent oversight in the glosses to Parts II and V, which have the ship advancing to the Equator at different times." Lowes, among others, implicitly makes the same error.
9. J.R. Ebbatson, "Coleridge's Mariner and the Rights of Man," *Studies In Romanticism*, II, 3 (1972), 176, *passim*.
10. Empson, p. 301.
11. See Lowes, p. 484 (notes).