Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s verse narrative *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a piece of literature that may well be seen as archetypal of the ‘weird and wonderful’: a phrase that became common currency in the nineteenth century, when the ascendency of scientific-utilitarian world views coincided with or indeed engendered a heightened curiosity about what seemed to defy scientific explanation. The mostly derogatory use of the ‘weird and wonderful’ designation reflects an ambivalent attitude to wonder as a sentiment the Romantics had ostensibly tried to rehabilitate, while any effort at its rehabilitation was bound to document its irreversible loss. A case in point is Wordsworth’s poem “The World Is Too Much With Us”, in which nostalgia for a bygone world and its creed is expressed from the vantage point of a culture that has forever gone “out of tune” with Nature, and harks back to simpler and more innocent beliefs. But in doing so, it highlights one of the root causes of Romantic agony, namely, the conscious or unconscious knowledge that having the notion of innocence is tantamount to having lost the thing itself, and that “the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment” (Coleridge, 1817) is *ipso facto* proof of the absence of simple faith from one’s regular frame of mind.

A world where naïve faith is sidelined, and where the supernatural is largely relegated to the realm of poetic imagination, is thus fundamentally different from one in which the supernatural is taken as real. This difference is arguably the condition for the literary treatment of supernatural phenomena, or for an aesthetic of the supernatural. Any literary reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or for that matter any reading of *Beowulf* or *Paradise Lost* that requires a suspension of disbelief, will by the same token affirm the reader’s fundamental incredulity, and signal the acceptance of the Beowulf poet’s monsters, of Milton’s fallen angels or of Coleridge’s water spirits, as fictional creations only. The higher the awareness of literature as artefact, however, the lower usually the readiness to take fiction as being
there for its own sake, and the greater the perceived challenge to vindicate its existence through interpretations that uncover some deeper meaning or purpose. The deeper the reading, though, the greater the danger of not taking the surface seriously enough; and in extreme instances of such probing, the very flesh, blood, and bones of a story may end up appearing as a mere and almost arbitrary cipher for some abstract message.

I can at present think of no better or no worse example of this than the beginning of a conference paper I heard in Taipei in the mid-1990s. As I remember, the very first sentence of the paper claimed that Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* is not the story of an old man trying to catch a big fish. Luckily, I was too flabbergasted to make a fool of myself by shouting out in protest, Yes of course it is! Whatever else it might be, Hemingway’s tale is about the characters, the places, and the events it portrays, and if it is not the story of an old man trying to catch a big fish, it is nothing. To me, the flat dismissal of the narrative material as ultimately unimportant seemed to entail—although it was certainly not meant that way—a gigantic insult of the writer’s earnest endeavour; an insult that the speaker could not redeem by even the most lucid and innovative interpretation following the abovementioned opening gambit. Consequently, I reckon I should have a good deal of sympathy for critics such as Michael Gardner, who feels that the tale told in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is not taken seriously enough by some other critics:

It is hard to believe, but one of the most persistent approaches to *The Ancient Mariner* is to regard it as not about the supernatural at all. William Darby Templeman, summarizing the poem for *Encyclopedia Americana*, says: “Though often regarded as a poem of the supernatural, *The Ancient Mariner* is rather one of abnormal psychology, in which a poor workman, illiterate, profoundly superstitious, and at least partly crazed by long exposure, fear, and loneliness, is presented as giving his own account of the happenings . . .” (Gardner: “Coleridge”, 25-6)
Gardner evidently sees at least a certain kind of psychological approach to the Mariner and his tale as destructive of the particular charm that Coleridge’s poem has exerted over readers from its first appearance in print in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, to the present day. Nonetheless, I would argue that charm is not only a feature, but likewise a topic of the text with its three basic levels of communication: that between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, that between the anonymous narrator of the poem and the implied addressee, and finally, that between the author and the reader. On all three levels, we can ask questions about the relationship between the respective communicants as well about the content aspect of their communication; on all three levels, we can look for evidence of post-traumatic disorder as well as evidence of direct or vicarious traumatisation, regardless of the truth or falsehood of the Mariner’s account. In the kind of analysis undertaken here, the question of the Mariner’s credibility may simply be taken as undecidable or even as irrelevant: for the present purpose, it makes little difference whether the old man’s strange behaviour and the power of his tale are explained by his having had exactly the horrifying experiences that he describes, or other horrifying experiences that made him invent and believe his own fantastic fabrications.

Gardner insists that “The poem’s horrors are the horrors of this world” (Gardner: “Interpretations”, 178), suggesting that the notion of the supernatural manifests human awareness of the limitedness of human perception and understanding, and that it consequently is something like an intuitive equivalent of Plato’s philosophical postulate of an intelligible realm. If we can accept this, then we should have little difficulty in ranking the notion of the unconscious mind together with the two aforementioned spheres as different models of the same something that lies outside the range of our normal perception, but that at certain times and in more or less subtle ways makes its presence felt in human experience. Seen in this light, the Mariner’s voyage appears as a sudden, violent, and unsettling confrontation with a dimension of existence normally hidden from view, and his narrative as an attempt
to communicate something as essentially incommunicable as would be the impressions of Plato’s hypothetical travellers to the domain of ideal forms.

This assumed incommunicability, however, contrasts with the structured and authoritative manner of delivery: a manner that differs from the usually meandering, halting, and painful recall of a traumatised person’s ordeal. In contrast, the Mariner seems to be exercising the kind of narrative control that causes “traumatic memory to lose its power as a fragment and symptom” (Vickroy, 3). This would appear to indicate that the Mariner has overcome the detrimental effects of his traumatic experience; the admittedly repetitive and compulsive nature of his behaviour, though, is hard to reconcile with the notion of healing:

Since then at an uncertain hour,

Now oftimes and now fewer,

That anguish comes and makes me tell

My ghastly aventure.

There are no two ways about it: the Mariner still has a problem, and this is a problem to which the message of universal love that he preaches has evidently not been the solution, making it seem even less likely to be a solution for anyone else who does not have the Mariner’s problem in the first place. At the centre of this problem, as far as we get to know it, is guilt; first occasioned by a gratuitous avicide, and then by the subsequent and assumedly consequent death of two hundred shipmates. This number, by the way, seems to raise interesting questions about the type of the vessel and of the voyage in which the crew were engaged, and about which the Mariner is audibly silent.

The Wedding-Guest would most probably have wished for the Mariner to remain just as silent about everything else, but there is no such luck for him. On his way to celebrate the marriage of a close relative, he is waylaid and detained by a complete stranger with mesmeric powers; a stranger with severe misgivings about the “merry din” and the “loud uproar” of the festivities. Not unlike Grendel,
whose spite against the revellers in Heorot is provoked by the cheerful noise that appears to mock his miserable condition, the Mariner is hell-bent on heavenly sabotage of human exuberance. As do most such endeavours at joy-killing, his wears a sanctimonious and hypocritical face that may well be taken to speak of sour grapes:

O sweeter than the Marriage-feast,
‘Tis sweeter far to me,
To walk together to the Kirk
With a goodly company.

Even if this sentiment were sincere on the part of the Mariner, what right would he have to impose it on anyone else? This is a question evidently not asked by the Wedding-Guest, who by that time has completely gone under the Mariner’s spell. Neither is there any indication of any actual or potential response of this kind by the addressee to whom the poem’s anonymous narrator is speaking. The uninterrupted flow of the dialogue leads almost seamlessly back into the concluding narrative stanzas, the last of which describes the Wedding-Guest’s turning away from the bridegroom’s house:

He went, like one that hath been stunn’d
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man
He rose the morrow morn.

The record of the communication between speaker and addressee thus ends shortly after the record of the communication between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest. In either one, the narrator’s authority has remained unchallenged; in both, the Mariner’s strange tale has been the main source of interest. It is the narrative frame, however, that gains especial significance in the communication between author and reader, for it gives the reader a chance to witness the potentially disturbing effect of the Mariner’s story on someone else, while the narrator and the author obviously want its power of attraction to have
full effect on the listener and the reader respectively. The communicational structure created by the contradictory injunctions bears a certain similarity to that of a cigarette packet with a government health warning stamped on it: please go ahead, but consider it understood that what you are now about to do, you will be doing at your own peril.

Anyone who finds this far-fetched should consider the ambivalent attitude of Romantic thinkers, with their privileging of spontaneity and immediacy, towards writing and reading as a more mediated and less natural form of communication than speech. One could hardly miss the irony in seeing Wordsworth’s opening of the poem “The Tables Turned”, namely, the entreaty “Up! Up! My Friend, and quit your books”, printed in a book, and notably, the same book that had Coleridge’s Mariner in it. Much in that volume represented the effort to bring the authenticity and the power of the spoken word back into a poetry reclaimed as the domain of the bard and the visionary. Visionaries, however, can be anything from mildly eccentric to downright dangerous. Coleridge suggests as much in “Kubla Khan”:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Readers of Coleridge’s poetry, and especially of the more fanciful specimens, should thus be aware that the author may be “trying to lure readers into uncomfortable or alien material” (Vickroy, 3). What the juxtaposition of the passage quoted above with the characterisation of the Mariner illustrates is the similarity between the visionary and the trauma sufferer, the one who has had an epiphany and the one who has been traumatised, or the one who has had a glimpse of heaven and the one who has had a glimpse of hell. Parallels between the symptoms of trauma and the effects of great elation have been
noticed not only on the individual, but also on the societal level, where “The trauma is the opposite of triumph, but it is constructed according to a similar logic” (Giesen, 113).

Accordingly, the Mariner may be seen as a synecdochic Everyman who embodies the mixed emotions of a post-Revolutionary world, or who embodies the human condition as one in which none of us can be free of suffering or of guilt while we are at the mercy of external forces that buffet us around, as well as of equally uncontrollable impulses that make us exert our power over fellow creatures. The Mariner does not only do so when he shoots the albatross, but likewise when the irresistible urge that drives him makes him enthrall his listeners in turn. Compelled by anguish, yet taking obvious delight in his “strange power of speech”, the Mariner himself is arguably more spell-bound than his listeners are, for they need to hear his story only once, while the Mariner will have to tell it again and again to different people, thus “becoming the sacrificial victim of his own tale, which must forever begin anew” (Modiano, 215).

If the telling of the Mariner’s narrative has any form of cathartic effect on himself, it is merely temporary, and he must keep toiling on. Like Sisyphus, who can never get his rock to rest on a higher plane, the Mariner is unlikely to get onto a higher plane of understanding, precisely because he feels sure that he has understood all there is to understand: the events that happened to him, as well as the life towards which he believes those events have guided him. In narrating the happenings and his conclusions again and again, he appears to be in a state of denial; every time he repeats the claim that his trauma has healed, he will reconfirm the fact that it has not. While the narration of traumatic events can indeed have a therapeutic effect on the teller, an endless repetition is certainly rather symptomatic than therapeutic, and the compulsive return to the traumatic experience is more likely to work against than for a healing process. This is how it can look from a therapist’s point of view:

One of the difficulties in treating trauma has been the undue focus on the content of an event that has engendered trauma. (Levine and Frederick, 98)
The Mariner’s obsession with the content of his memories enables him to hold his audience: like the bards or skops of old, he has a good yarn, and he makes a meal of it. At the same time, he is caught in his own trap, and this predicament seems to transfer to the narrator of the poem, who begins his account in a similar fashion: “It is an ancient Mariner” and “There was a ship” are openings that mirror each other. The narrative in which the Mariner’s story is embedded feels just as carefully crafted as the embedded narrative, and consequently, there is good reason to assume that like the Mariner, the narrator of the poem is telling the story neither for the first nor for the last time. Good yarns, after all, ask to be retold; and good poems to be reread, regardless of their significance for, or their effect on the reader.

It is the effect on the reader that should concern the reader of Coleridge’s “Rime”, who learns of the vicarious traumatisation and consequent social isolation of the Wedding-Guest: this must surely cast further doubt on the validity of the Mariner’s perception not only of what is real and true, but of what is good and right. Plainly put, the moral of the Mariner’s tale is discredited by his circumstances as well as by his behaviour, and to equate it with the moral of Coleridge’s poem would mean to virtually ignore the latter’s ambiguous and contradictory nature, one of the key contradictions being that the Mariner preaches love of all creatures while preventing the Wedding-Guest from showing his love for his next of kin by taking part in the celebration. So much for the practical benefit of the Mariner’s advice.

If additional qualifications are needed, one may consider St John of the Cross and his dictum that the soul “must be stripped of all things created, and of its own actions and abilities” (Peers, 98-99), including the love of fellow creatures. One may also consider that the Devil himself is made to paraphrase a divine commandment as “We must love the Holy Spirit with all our strength and we must love Tom, Dick and Harry as ourselves” (Bridie, 51), when he appears as a character in a twentieth century Scottish play; and there would certainly be more ways to support the assumption that the Wedding-Guest, the implied listener and the reader all have good reason to take the Mariner’s message
with a healthy dose of salt. The assumption that they would also have good reason to brace themselves for the impact of the Mariner’s tale is further supported by judgments such as the following:

literary trauma, concerned as it is with the experience of limits and the destabilization of the accepted, might be considered as an emotional experience that strikes at the roots of identity and durably displaces certainties. (Ganteau and Onega, 19)

In this specific category of literary communication, of which I see Coleridge’s “Rime” as a prime specimen, no fantastic or supernatural devices, nor indeed any means of distancing through narrative technique, can form more than a thin layer of protection against the potentially contagious effect of trauma narrative on an empathetic audience. Yet those devices can trigger a metatextual reading that focuses not on the content of the tale, but on the manner of the telling. In the present case, they thus allow for reflections on Coleridge’s poem in the context of a Romantic project that aimed at liberating the Promethean energies and sounding the deepest depths of the human soul. The dangers of this may not have been obvious to all Romantics, who were arguably prone to “the inhumanity of the enthusiast, the terrible rectitude of youth” (Gordon, 244), but they seem to have been intuitively grasped and expressed by Coleridge in the “Rime”, whose message to the discerning reader thus stands in diametrical contrast to the message peddled by the Mariner.

What can hardly escape a discerning reader is that the Mariner’s simple faith neither enables him to lead a normal life, nor to do much good to others. At most, it shields him from the meta-metaphysical question that is inherent in any kind of traumatic experience: the question whether there is any significant difference between the belief in a universe ruled by forces that take little or no account of human suffering, and the belief in a providential power that permits all sorts of terrible things to be done by and to happen to people as part of some greater scheme or higher reasoning. Readers who see the “Rime” in the light of this question may well conclude that regardless of what may have been Coleridge’s intention, the poem he wrote does not support any kind of moral, but instead directs the
reader towards a meta-moral stance through suggesting that “morality is a response to meaningless change and loss” (Williams, 258), an uphill battle to make human sense of a meaningless cosmos. But if discerning readers take up the challenge to figure out what precisely it is that can make “a sadder and a wiser man”, they can hardly avoid pondering this type of question as well as the most uncomfortable and disconcerting conclusions. The possible gain for their pains may be a more profound and a more profoundly human appreciation of Coleridge’s poem than any less radical questioning could produce.


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