



The Ancient Mariner – A Green Parable?

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Reprinted from *GreenSpirit*, Summer 2000

In 1797, at the full tide of European Romanticism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge began working on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. This imaginary traveller's tale contains the symbolic killing of a natural creature, the albatross, which Coleridge's admirable biographer, Richard Holmes, considers identifies the poem as a 'green parable' and he claims that 'the notion of the green parable deserves further exploration.' If we begin to follow up Holmes' suggestion we find, I believe, a key text and inspiration for Creation Spirituality.

The Ancient Mariner is a ballad written in a simple style, gripping the reader by its sensuous imagery and evocation of archetypal emotions. The Mariner is the vagrant, the anguished misfit, who waylays the narrator and prevents him from joining in one of the most celebratory and social of all human events, a wedding. The Mariner has singled out this particular wedding guest, for no given reason, and this encourages the reader to identify with him as an Everyman figure. He is about to be forcibly removed from a state of merely social relatedness and turned towards the 'otherness' of the environment. The guest - and the reader - are compelled to accompany the Mariner in imagination away from the wedding, beyond the safe world of the land, the church, the lighthouse, and into the unknown. The storm and the ice the seafarers encounter are anti-human and feel as if anti-life. Common sense at this point might raise its prosaic head and say 'Why go? What do you gain by tempting nature to do its worst?' The revelatory perception that the world is not made for us, that there are places where we are not meant to be, is here implicit and it also has an implicit answer. The spirit of the explorers whom Coleridge read with constant fascination animates the poem, as in the line: 'We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea'. The journey into the unknown is felt as a natural expression of human energy, a compelling expansion of human awareness. Though the enterprise is full of risk, it is necessary, part of the deep-laid romanticism of the human past.

Into the alien (though beautiful) world of sea and cold comes the great bird flying. The reader feels the exaltation, the response of 'this shouldn't be able to live here, but it gloriously and awesomely can...' The experience suggests to the sailors something religious, 'As if it had been a Christian soul, / We hailed it in God's name.' There is not only a communication between the creature and the human beings - it comes to their call and eats their food - there is also the sense of a kind of universal complicity, a wholeness which works for all its elements, expressed by the following south-wind which takes the mariners where they want to go. This recalls the experience of people close to nature that certain states of sensitivity and goodwill lead to a perception that 'all things work together for good'. No doubt at least part of this is the concentrated mind's enhanced ability to integrate potentially discordant experiences into new

patterns. But some things cannot be integrated. The wanton destruction of harmony and relatedness is represented in the poem by the 'act gratuit' of the Mariner. For no reason at all, meaninglessly, he shoots the albatross 'with my cross-bow.' This is not part of risky exploration. It is something different – a perverseness, a disconnection. It cannot be integrated at the given moment but needs the forging of a new pattern, worked out through the dimension of time.

The killing of the albatross has sometimes been described by critics as a trivial, token act but surely only an unjustifiably compartmentalized form of thinking could see it in this way. The shooting actually stands for every act of mindless cruelty, all failure to respect and feel with other life forms. There is a parallel with John Muir's detestation of the wanton destruction of bears in Yosemite since they 'are made of the same dust as we, and breathe the same winds and drink of the same waters.' In standing for all similar actions the killing of the albatross also reinforces that habit of mind which operates symbolically - senses affinities and has an intuitive awareness of connection. If the albatross stands for life itself, the story of its killing it foreshadows – carries the warning and the darkness – of complete ecological disaster.

For the Ancient Mariner the shooting of the bird brings a retribution which represents the unbearable. The wind drops leaving the ship becalmed and there is no water to drink so that the sailors all die slowly of thirst, except for the Mariner himself who is compelled to suffer instead 'the nightmare Life-in-Death.' His situation is redeemed by another spontaneous act, his blessing of the water snakes that swim around the ship. He does it 'unawares', in a moment of grace rather than moralistic will. Although they are alien and other (the way most people tend to experience snakes) still they are alive and beautiful. The blessing causes the albatross to fall off the Mariner's neck, like the millstone of Christian iconography, or the burden from the back of Bunyan's pilgrim, and sink 'like lead into the sea.' Again, the act stands for all impulses towards honouring and preserving our natural environment. The Mariner still has much to suffer but he has become a kind of prophet who must urgently make himself heard.

'The Ancient Mariner' is an essentially Christian poem and in this way differs from most Romantic texts, and sharply from the spirit of such later Romantics as Tennyson, Hardy and Lawrence. In the unexplored territory, the place where we are not welcome, although there is intolerable suffering, there are also the tokens of a transcending intelligence. The cross imagery is spelled out and unmissable. The Mariner too is a Christ figure to the extent that he bears the burden for the rest of the crew, who share his guilt because at one stage they had applauded his destructive act. At the end of the poem when the Pilot's boat goes out to investigate the returning, spectral ship, neither the Pilot nor the boatboy can bear the encounter. The Pilot faints and the boatboy goes mad. Only the 'holy Hermit' has (barely) enough strength to address the Mariner and then receive his confession. The Mariner himself becomes part of nature as well as remaining human: 'I pass like night from land to land/I have strange power of speech.' This particular transcending of a duality perhaps represents a deep human need.

Contemporary responses to the poem perhaps indicate something about its originality. Southey wrote a disparaging review including the comment: 'We do not understand the story sufficiently to analyse it. It is a Dutch attempt at German sublimity.' There were other more sympathetic views (not many) but perhaps Southey's bafflement suggests that the poem went beyond the shared Romantic consciousness of that moment and that more time was needed for it to become as transparent and relevant as it is for us today.

Wordsworth's reactions are also revealing. When working on the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 Wordsworth (although he had contributed ideas and even lines to the poem at its inception), insisted on consigning *The Ancient Mariner* to the end of the volume and complained: 'The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects, first that the principal person has no distinct character...secondly that he does not act but is continually acted upon, thirdly that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other...' To which a modern defender of the poem, soaked in a sad experience of human destructiveness of nature, on a scale which Wordsworth could hardly have guessed at, might respond, firstly: that an Everyman does not need a 'distinct character since character must be the result of reflective personal development: in killing the albatross the Mariner exemplifies an undeveloped and therefore characterless human being, the moral implication being that self-development is imperative; secondly that to be acted upon must be a central part of the human experience of nature - only a lurking machismo within a patriarchal mindset could interpret this necessity as purely negative; and thirdly that the events of the poem connect in the chain: destruction leads to suffering; then blessing leads to enlightenment and a prophetic imperative. The 'passivity' of the Mariner connects up with the concept of 'passive attentiveness' as developed by Goethe. Wordsworth himself expressed it in the phrase 'wise passiveness', describing the state of mind wherein 'one impulse from the vernal wood can teach you more of man, of moral evil and of good than all the sages can.' There is, however a radiant paradox here in that an understanding of the mind as an active participant in perception is also essential to Romanticism. The two apparently opposite states, passive and participative, go together in a unity which needs to be experienced directly.

Richard Holmes' interprets the poem as showing 'man's destructive effect on the natural world, so that human moral blindness inadvertently introduces evil into the benign systems of nature, releasing uncontrollable forces that take a terrible revenge.' While agreeing with this up to a point, I suggest that the 'systems of nature' dramatised in the poem are hardly benign - at least, not in any comfortable sense. Like the author or the Book of Job, and like Annie Dillard in our own time, Coleridge simply but urgently, palpably, plunges us into the beauty and awesomeness of the natural world - and leaves us to explore further our own strange and powerful impulses of benignity towards that world.