

## WILLIAM EMPSON

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### THE ANCIENT MARINER: AN ANSWER TO WARREN

Edited by John Haffenden

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

William Empson first touched on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in an essay entitled "Marvell's Garden," reprinted in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935; also known as *English Pastoral Poetry*, New York, 1938). But his first substantial piece of writing on Coleridge was "The Ancient Mariner" (*Critical Quarterly*, 6, 1964; reprinted in *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. J. Haffenden, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987)—a piece which he developed throughout the next decade in order for it to feature as the 100-page "Introduction" to *Coleridge's Verse: A Selection*, edited by Empson and David Pirie (London, 1972; recently reprinted as *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989). In sum, he had been studying *The Ancient Mariner*, on and off, for no less than forty years by the time he came to publish his mighty revisionist essay on the poet and the poem. He was pleased with his big effort, and satisfied that he had taken stock of recent studies of Coleridge by critics including Walter Jackson Bate, H. W. Piper, and John Colmer.

But at some point in the mid-to-late 1970s, while giving a lecture on Coleridge, he was reminded by a questioner of the very influential status of Robert Penn Warren's "A Poem of Pure Imagination: an Experiment in Reading" (*Kenyon Review*, 1946; reprinted in *Selected Essays*, 1964), an essay which is widely regarded as a modern classic. Empson felt doubly challenged: not only had he failed to discuss Warren's piece in his own essay, but the thrust of "A Poem of Pure Imagination" had been to treat *The Ancient Mariner* as an essentially Symbolist production—a procedure which Empson utterly deplored. The Symbolist movement, he averred, is "determinedly anti-intellectual"; Symbolism invites irrationalism in both poet and critic, who satisfy themselves with "apparently ineffable verbal communications." Sym-

bolist poetry, he alleged in a fighting credo called "Argufying in Poetry" (1963), "is the poetry of the hamstrung, the people who have cut the strings in their legs."

There was nothing for it, he felt, but to answer Robert Penn Warren in definitive detail—for the honorable reason he had enunciated in 1973: "In the learned world, a man loses his standing if he refuses to answer a plain refutation." In many respects, Warren's seminal essay was just such a plain (prior) refutation of Empson's thesis on *The Ancient Mariner*. Empson was stubborn in his views and pugnacious in answering back; in fact, he could be downright rude to both friend and foe—for reasons set out at the very beginning of his career, in a trial piece dating from 1930:

If you attack a view in any detail that proves you to have some sympathy with it; there is already a conflict in you which mirrors the conflict in which you take part; that is why you understand it sufficiently to take part in it. Only because you can foresee and enter into the opposing arguments can you answer them; only because it is interesting to you do you engage in argument about it.

For, personally, I am attracted by the notion of a hearty indifference to one's own and other people's feelings, when a fragment of the truth is in question . . . ("Obscurity and Annotation," in *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*).

In such terms, the following essay by Empson amounts to both a bold answer and a tremendous compliment to Robert Penn Warren. Recently discovered in the welter of Empson's papers, it came to light too late for inclusion in *Argufying*, and is therefore published here for the first time, some twelve years after it was written. It is of course especially appropriate that it appear in the *Kenyon Review*.

**R**ECENTLY, while co-editing a selection from Coleridge's poetry,<sup>1</sup> I had to try to make sense of the details of the variants in the *Ancient Mariner*, but I did not much bother about the Symbolist theories which have been prevalent during the last thirty or forty years, feeling sure that they would only darken counsel. Having arrived at some conclusions, I feel now that I ought to go back and reconsider the Symbolist argument, lest my case go by default. I can report finding Robert Penn Warren's essay ("A Poem of Pure Imagination," 1946) better than it seemed in my vague memory of it. What he calls the "primary theme," that we need to be somehow in harmony with Nature, and the "secondary," that our imagination inherently has means of bringing us into such harmony, though it has rules of its own which are liable to be harmful, were pretty certainly in the mind of the poet while composing the first draft (1797); and the more pietistic of the ideas ascribed by the essay were in his mind when preparing the all-but final text (published 1817).<sup>2</sup> The details which Mr Warren claims to explain nearly always need explaining; and as a rule, when he is wrong about the poet's intentions, we can only be sure

of it because of the devoted work on the *Notebooks* and *Letters* which has been published since he wrote. Besides, Coleridge by 1815 had gone a long way towards inventing the Symbolist theory; and he added to the poem some very misleading "glosses" in the margin which encourage such an interpretation. I expect he would have been shocked by the Warren essay, perhaps even driven back halfway to his earlier health of mind; but one must admit that the corruption of the poem was partly his fault. To read a Symbolist account with sympathy costs me a bit of an effort, but I find it a rewarding one, as it makes even more clear that the Glosses of 1817 need to be removed.

The nastiest Gloss receives the highest concentration of theorizing from Mr Warren, who appreciates the difficulty of accepting our standard text. Although the south wind continues to blow, after the Mariner has shot the Albatross, the crew at first blame him "for killing the bird of good luck" (l. 95), who had made it blow. However, in the next verse the weather gets still better; matters continue to improve, and they change their minds.

But when the fog clears off, they justify the same, and thus make themselves accomplices in the crime.

(Coleridge wrote *cleared*; he was in a bad mental condition when he wrote the Glosses. The year before this edition, he tells us, he had a breakdown during which he had to be continually watched to keep him from suicide.) They change their minds again when the ship is becalmed in the tropics, and hang the bird round his neck. The main effect in the poem, I think, is that they all felt the bird to be magical somehow, sure to bring good luck or bad, and assumed that that was why the Mariner had killed it (acting like his source, the "second Captain" [i.e., Lieutenant] in Shelvocke's *Voyages*).<sup>3</sup> But the bemused Coleridge who wrote Glosses in 1815 wanted to pretend that all his early poems had pious morals, and there was a rather striking absence of any moral about killing all the crew except the murderer of the Albatross, so he thought he would look a bit holier if he wrote this greasy bit of sanctimoniousness in the margin.

He had once known better. Letter 447 of 1802, referring to *John* 9.3, says that Jesus Christ had

... most effectively quashed the pernicious *moral* error of attributing all afflictions to direct Judgments of God upon the Individual so afflicted.

— whereas the later Coleridge, perhaps I need to explain, felt that he was saving God's face when he cooked up an accusation against the crew. It is a flimsy one, as the ground for a death penalty. I am not sure of Mr Warren's position here, because at one point he speaks of

... the great central fact of the poem, the fact which no reader could miss — the broken tabu, the torments of guilt and punishment, the joy of reconciliation . . . (271)

But there is no tabu. Probably the crew had never even heard of an albatross, let alone seen one. Their views on albatrosses veer to and fro with every change in the weather; we are watching the invention of a superstition about albatrosses. What the crew say here is that the bird habitually caused fog; this might easily prove fatal to them, and every explorer claims the right to kill an animal if his life depends upon doing it. Of course, their logic is tiresomely bad, but surely they are not killed for that. Then again, their sin is the friendly acceptance of an act already done by a comrade, who admittedly acted for the good of the group, and as soon as they decide he was mistaken their acceptance is eagerly withdrawn. Coleridge himself had never been a convinced vegetarian, and at the time when he wrote this Gloss had decided that animals were merely "things" towards which a Christian has no duties.<sup>4</sup> The invention of spiteful reasons for arguing that other people deserve their sufferings had merely become one of the habits of his religiosity, with which he expected to gratify his public.

Poor Mr Warren feels that to justify this Gloss, and others like it, is a duty to the poet and requires a profound moral and philosophical theory. It must be maintained, to start with, that to kill the Albatross was peculiarly bad:

The crime is, symbolically, a murder . . . It involves the violation of hospitality and of gratitude (*pious* equals *faithful* and the bird is "of good omen") and of sanctity (the religious connotations of *pious* etc.). . . . And the necessary criminality is established, we have seen, in two ways: (1) by making the gravity of the act depend on the state of the will which prompts it, and (2) by symbolically defining the bird as a "Christian soul," as "*pious*," etc. (229)

To do him justice, I thought, the reason why he twice wrote "*pious* etc.," among these three uses of the word *pious*, was that a decent shame made him hide his evidence for the bird's piety. But he had just dropped a useful hint, that it "partakes of the human . . . devotions" (228). The bird had repeatedly attended evensong, a regular prayer-meeting, presumably held on deck, and that was why Coleridge wrote his Gloss (l. 83): "The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen." When composing the Glosses he tried to imagine a quaint editor of 1600 or so, writing in the margins of a poem already about seventy years old; and Coleridge himself was peering blearily at an actual poem, nearly twenty years old, written by himself when a very different man. Maybe he actually believed that he had meant a ritual when he wrote "*vespers*," but anyway he would consider it quite fair to pretend so. The bird would soon learn that the crew assembled on deck at sunset, and that many of them would be at leisure for play afterwards, proffering biscuit-worms. After its death, the crew might easily remember this habit as a mark of piety. Before studying Mr Warren, I could only see the Old Coleridge as leering at the grown-ups and muttering "Holy lies before the kiddies, eh?"; but this Gloss-writer is a go-between, an educated man who still believed in the Active

Universe and can therefore interpret the poem to us; he might just be superstitious enough to believe that the bird had deliberately attended vespers. Of course, not everything can be excused in this way; it does not justify the Gloss about "accomplices of the crime."

As to what Coleridge had meant by the word *vespers*, the *OED* speaks very firmly, quoting this line from the poem; it meant "evening." But the great dictionary is sometimes wrong when it makes these literary decisions, which are anyway *ultra vires*; the poet was trying to write a pastiche of the English of 1600, so the result cannot be evidence about the English of 1815. The word was always known to derive from Hesperus. There is a telling quotation from Purchas's *Pilgrimage* (1613): "From which ninth houre the lewes began their Vespera or evening," their official evening, and to work "in these Vespers" would bring bad luck, they thought. The use for a religious service, whether Roman Catholic or Anglican, is not found before the seventeenth century. Coleridge however may not have known this, and he certainly intended his Mariner to be a pre-Reformation Christian who makes habitual use of pious phrases. His religion makes all the more baffling to him the reality which he so bravely confronts. But the young Coleridge is unlikely to have envisaged a nightly prayer-meeting on board his ship; chiefly because someone would have to read the prayers, usually the captain himself, and the democratic opinions of Coleridge made him unwilling to allow any hierarchy on his ship at all. So the dictionary is right, and the young Coleridge would mean by the word a time of day, though one which was viewed with piety. Also he would not be keen to insist that the Mariner had worn a cross round his neck, till it was snatched away (blasphemously, one would think) to make room for the enormous Albatross. This detail of the story is important to Mr Warren, who might otherwise find himself recommending kindness to animals, a thing he particularly despises under the odd name of Humanitarianism; hence he says:

The idea of the crime against God rather than man is further emphasized by the fact that the cross is removed from the Mariner's neck to make place for the dead bird . . . (230)

The machine-gun rattle of "On account of the FAC that" is often used to impose a false argument, and "the fact" here is a specially imaginative one. The Mariner need only mean: "People often wear crosses round their necks, and I had the bird hung round mine, as the same sort of thing." But perhaps, even here, Mr Warren does no more than carry out energetically a systematic misreading of the original poem which the Coleridge of 1815 attempted in a dim and muddled way.

If we restore practically all cuts, and omit all Glosses, we get a story of adventure and misunderstanding; such a story is not likely to make any reader suppose that its accidents are punishments calculated by God, least of all when Death in person tosses dice to decide on them. However, I have no wish to deny that a dramatic story inherently insinuates morals, and that these may act upon us in complicated ways. In *The Winter's Tale*, for example, Perdita

believes that a peasant girl ought not to interbreed with royalty, so she is in despair; the audience is tempted to think her views on genetics a bit exaggerated. Then she turns out to be a princess, so she can have her prince without changing her views; the audience accepts the happy ending, feeling it to be deserved, and need no longer consider what ought to be done in the case first proposed. Rather in the same way, Coleridge held a heretical belief that all life is one, or at least that killing the Albatross was very bad; but he knew that most of his readers would not agree with him. So it was convenient to say, as part of the story, that the bird just happened to be a pet of the powerful Spirit of the South Pole, a thing the Mariner could not have known beforehand. The Mariner himself evidently does not accept this excuse, at any rate after the rest of the crew are dead; and the crew (so far as we can guess) just curse him for being a Jonah, the kind of man who is always getting into trouble with the spirits. In this way, the poem can recommend the author's doctrine without discussing how far it should be taken, while still leaving ample room for the alternative theory that the Mariner is an interesting case of Neurotic Guilt. The poem gives a rather grim picture of Nature, much more so than the Wordsworthian conversation-pieces that Coleridge had been writing just before; indeed, Wordsworth seems to have felt this as a betrayal when he got back from Germany; but Coleridge might have answered that the actual Maritime Expansion had been a good deal grimmer than his picture of it, legends and all.

We are now to examine the symbolism of the sun and moon, on which the fame of the essay chiefly rests. I recognise that the symbolism is not treated as important in itself, but as a way to express the doctrines about Nature and Imagination; sure enough, but the effect of it is also to give them a pietistic slant. In the essay, the theory is introduced at the beginning of Part IV, after a discussion of the Latin epigraph from Burnet; this apparently speaks of the great variety of spirits in the world, and then warns us of the uncertainty of the subject, ending: "we must earnestly seek after truth, maintaining measure, that we may distinguish things certain from those uncertain, day from night." Coleridge makes an "ironical reversal" of the position of Burnet, says Mr Warren (234), treating the things of night as the good ones. There is a certain amount of truth here; actually, Coleridge had altered the quotation to make it express belief in fairies and suchlike, whereas Burnet (who despised them) was expressing belief in angels.<sup>5</sup> But the nature-spirits of Coleridge are by no means confined to the night, and to impute this preference to them could not have been his purpose in fudging Burnett:

The motto ends on the day-night contrast, and points to this contrast as a central fact of the poem. We may get some clue to the content of the distinction by remembering that in the poem the good events take place under the aegis of the moon, the bad events under that of the sun. (233-34)

Telling us to "remember" it from our own reading is a delicious bit of bounce; even the disciples of the theory find the plausible examples hard to remember.

One day after I had said my piece about the *Mariner* an admirer of Mr Warren told me that I couldn't get away from the basic facts of his essay, such as that the Albatross was shot by moonlight—awfully tricky shooting, so it couldn't have been put in for nothing. This indeed was what drove me back to the essay. Mr Warren, I found, does not list the shooting as a good event. He says that the Albatross is “as it were, a moon-bird” (239) because always seen by diffused light; it enters the poem in a fog—indeed, its entry is the first we hear of a fog, but a mist had arrived a dozen lines before. Fog is common in the terrible seas south of the Horn, both from the meeting of warm and cold currents and from blizzards making snow hang in the air. Just as the Albatross arrives, an ice-floe cracks apart so that the ship can escape northwards, and a south wind gets up to drive it through; the crew may reasonably call the bird lucky. After that it follows the ship, and will come when called, continuing to eat biscuit-worms; and there were nine days which it spent perched in the rigging, dimly visible by the moonlight through the fog. “God save thee,” says the Guest, after a grim pause while the Mariner's face works in agony; “why look'st thou so?” . . . “I shot the Albatross.” The answer follows no background or setting to the event, just as it gives no hint of the motive (how very misleading to say that the poem makes “the gravity of the act depend on the state of the will which prompts it” [229]). A pair of happy scenes, by day and night, have just been shown, but this gives no reason for supposing that the bird was shot during either of them; to assume from contiguity that the death came from the second one is to ignore the dramatic way the story is told. Mr Warren does not make this assumption, but it is more plausible than the one he does make; he argues from a juxtaposition forward instead of backward, equally destructive of the drama and the poetry, and is thus able to blame the sun.

The next major incident by moonlight is the death of the whole crew. Mr Warren explains that the moon represents the Imagination, which ought to have good effects, but it becomes a torment when misused. Probably, even at an early stage of inventing the poem, Coleridge did want to express this truth, but he could not have hoped to do it by the good effects of the moon. It is interesting, I think, to have Mr Warren tell us that fear came to the Mariner when the moon arose, “as specified by the placement of the Gloss” (242); this shows what extravagant faith he has in the Glosses, even when patently wrong. Here we have the longest verse in the poem, with nine lines; it starts with the fear, then describes an agonizing wait, then says the wait lasted *till* the moon rose. So the Gloss is put six lines too early. If the Coleridge of 1815 could not even get this placement right, no wonder he left out a verse which he had written long before, much needed to clarify the plot. The incident ought to have interested Mr Warren, because it is the only *use* made of the moon in the poem. The crew have just heard that they must die, and are indignant with the Mariner for having fetched the Ghost-ship which turned out to have Death in it; but they cannot *speak* an effective curse (powerful enough to raise spirits

against him) because they are dumb through drought; so they curse him, just as they die, by aiming at him the glitter of the moon in their eyes. Such was the first plan, but Coleridge learned, some time after 1800, that a horned moon (which he needed so that he could have a bad-luck star between the horns) could not rise just at sunset, but that a waning horned moon could rise during the night; this was what made him write the magnificent verse about waiting in the dark, first found in a notebook entry made just after the return from Malta.<sup>6</sup> The crew are heroically refusing to die till the moon gets up, so as to fit in their curse; and the fear of the Mariner is of course felt in the dark of the foggy night, not knowing what they might do. You cannot have this splendid bit of melodrama if you refuse to attend to the story.

After a period of torment for the solitary Mariner we have the blessing of the water-snakes, and on this the whole moon-theory was evidently based. The soothing half-veiling moonlight made the creatures of the calm look better than before, and thus (perhaps) the great change in the Mariner's attitude became possible. The snakes can have bright colours too, when in the shadow of the ship, because they are phosphorescent, in the rotting sea. I think this is the only case in the poem where moonlight presides over a wholly good event.

Later, Mr Warren says that another incident recalls "the rising of the great storm after the first redemption scene — a storm which, we must remember, was both terrible and festal in its aspect" (248). I certainly do not remember a party, if that is what "festal" means; the Mariner never speaks to the spirits, nor they to him. However, one may agree that this was a "redemption scene," and after it the Mariner fell into a trance. The narrative is very concentrated, so the storm comes only a few lines after the blessing; but that does not mean that they happen together and are "symbolically" united. The ship is taken southward round Africa, so that when the Mariner wakes (in rain, not yet in storm) he is far enough south again to see the Aurora Borealis. Storm and a great wind mark the descent from the Aurora of the Spirits of Air and Electricity, who take over the bodies and sail the ship. Already in the second edition (1800) Coleridge spoiled this excellent idea, because Southey wrote a stupid grumble in his review, putting:

The loud wind never reached the ship,  
Yet now the ship moved on! (ll. 363-64)

Most of the other magic winds in the poem are impalpable, so maybe he felt this was consistent, as well as face-saving. But how can the ship start moving before the corpses have stirred, if they are needed to work the ropes? The first version is more vivid and more dream-like, and carries a needed echo in "like a stone," and above all makes the story intelligible:

The strong wind reached the ship: it roar'd  
And dropped down like a stone!  
Between the lightning and the Moon  
The dead men gave a moan. (ll. 363-66)



To be sure, this is not what winds usually do, but one does not often witness the arrival on board of the Spirits of the Air. And it seems that Coleridge actually had experienced winds that were hardly less peculiar. He writes to Tom Wedgwood, in 1803 (Letter 484):

I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks and hills, a traveller up an alpine road, but my spirit courses, drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn: a wild activity, of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion, rises up from within me—a sort of *bottom-wind*, that blows to no point of the compass, & comes from I know not whence, but agitates the whole of me; my whole Being is filled with waves, as it were, that roll & stumble, one this way, & one that way, like things that have no common master.

The *OED* quotes a definition of a “bottom-wind,” later in the nineteenth century: “The Bottom-wind has its name from being supposed to arise from the bottom of those lakes which are situated amongst mountains.” This would be the reverse of the wind which fell upon the ship; except that, if you try to explain such a wind, you may suppose that it first falls vertically upon the middle of the lake and then spreads out on all sides. The quotation shows, I think, that the text of the first edition ought to be kept here. The moon is present at this scene, but it plays a minor part beside the lightning and the aurora.

However, its presence here is a help to Mr Warren in dealing with the next moon-scene, where to treat the Gloss respectfully is especially difficult. The bemused or hag-ridden Coleridge of 1814, seeing in his old text the words, “And now this spell was snapped” (l. 496), felt he had better be as reassuring as possible, so he added in the margin “The curse is finally expiated.” The curse was just then erupting into a particularly gaudy phase of its long life, but Mr Warren pluckily starts off:

The rising of the breeze now, after this second redemption scene, corresponds to the rising of the great storm after the first redemption scene . . . (248)

But there isn't any second redemption, and the two scenes are unlike at every point. The Mariner wakes up to find the corpses together in an indignation-meeting; they glare their curse at him out of eyes which glitter in the moonlight, just as when they died—here there is a correspondence, because a new lot of spirits, who are trying to act on the curse made by the crew (which thus turns out to have been as powerful as they intended), have at last got possession of their corpses. At first the Mariner cannot look away from them, or even pray for help, which is perhaps only a result of horror; then some other compulsion makes him look ahead (apparently he gets a premonition that he is nearing home), so he thinks that the spell of these enemy spirits has been broken. He still feels they are like frightful fiends. Then he feels a tiny private wind on his fevered cheek, which has no external effects such as making a ripple; any magical event rather frightens him now, but this seems meant as an encouragement, and sure enough the home port soon comes into sight. He

thanks God and sobs for joy, but what happens next is a battle between two groups of earth-spirits, for possession of him; the deep-red ones (only in the first edition) are on the side of the crew, the crimson ones on the side of the air-spirits and the innocent Mariner. It is the crimson ones, we may now suppose, who broke the weak spell (if there was one) of the deep-red ones and brought the private wind. Though tied to their locality, earth-spirits have a certain range, and thus the supporters of the crew were able to capture the bodies before the Mariner could see land—this is the kind of detail which really does need explaining in a Gloss. The Moon shines all through the battle, but that does not prove it to be on the good side rather than the bad side. At every stage, I think, the effect of ascribing a Symbolism to the moon is to distract attention from what is going on, whereas the action is the most likely source for an allegory.

The idea that the sun is a symbol for evil needs viewing more gravely, as it stands for a moral perversion, though Mr Warren merely accepted it as a standard literary doctrine when he wrote. It really does fit the Coleridge of the *Sybilline Leaves* (1817), who was revolting against the Nature he had revered when he was a great poet, also against Benthamism and the Enlightenment. That is why a parody of Coleridge by Peacock, Mr Flosky in *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), had “called the sun an *ignis fatuus*”; Peacock was a very understanding man, and not at all in the business of viewing the Romantics gravely, but I expect he would feel as surprised as I do to find this mental disease treated as especially pious and advanced. We ought to reject any harm it did to the final poem; but the examples from which Mr Warren argued for this part of his theory had already appeared in the first edition of the poem (1798), when Coleridge was certainly free from it.

On the voyage southward, at the start of the poem, “The sun came up upon the left,” and shone bright, but did no harm. We next hear of it when they are emerging from the antarctic fog, and a parallel verse tells us they are sailing northward:

The Sun now rose upon the right;  
 Out of the mist came he,  
 Still hid in mist, and on the left  
 Went down into the sea. (ll. 87-90)

The first version “And broad as a weft upon the left,” which a reviewer found unintelligible, had made the same point; the mist caused a misshapen image of the setting sun, very broad, and the crew felt that was sinister, like a flag calling for help. This verse begins section II, and happens to come next after the line “I shot the Albatross” (l. 86), which ends section I. Mr Warren says:

The crime, as it were, brings the sun. Ostensibly, the line simply describes a change in the ship's direction, but it suddenly, with dramatic violence, supplants moon with sun in association with the unexpected revelation of the crime . . . (240)

He does not tell us that a new section begins in between, and yet that decides how the verses should be read aloud. After forcing himself to make the abrupt confession, the Mariner gulps down his horrors for a bit before resuming the tone of narrative, and then his first remark is retrospective: "At this stage, the sun was rising on the right every morning." It had been doing so ever since the Albatross arrived, with a northward channel and a south wind; but the Mariner needs to mention the fact now, to collect himself and introduce the run up to the tropics. Did Mr Warren think the ship had been "simply changing direction" all the time? That method would not have brought it so dangerously far. To read the passage in the Symbolist way, in fact, you must pretend that the words are just shapes on the page, not capable of telling a story, not representing any natural use of the spoken language. I am surprised that anyone has the patience.

On his next page, Mr Warren is already pointing out that the sun of the tropical calm is called "bloody":

... as though we had implied here a fable of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, whose fair promises had wound up in the blood-bath of the end of the century. (241)

The critic does not risk saying that it *was* implied, but surely the remark is fairly pointless unless *he* implies it. I admit that Coleridge changed his view of the French revolutionary leaders while writing the poem; he disapproved of their invasion of Switzerland, and this decided him, like a number of other left-wing patriots during 1798, that he would help to defend England if necessary. He announced his position in *France, an Ode* and *Fears in Solitude*, both published that year; but it did not mean any change in his basic position. He thought that the atheism of the French had led them astray; this would not make him suspect that his own previous opinions had been wrong. He published *Fire, Famine and Slaughter* the same year, a poem which means that the insolence of Pitt was what had driven the French leaders to war.<sup>7</sup> Of course the *Fears* say "we have offended," in a parsonic manner, but that is to show solidarity with England; Coleridge has not committed any of the English crimes that he lists. Later on, he actually reprinted part of the *Fears* to show he had never been a Jacobin, but Southey said: "If he was not a Jacobine, in the common acceptation of the name, I wonder who the Devil was."<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence here for a profound revulsion against his earlier views, such as might echo unconsciously into the ballad. For a critic to find it in these passages implies a complete indifference to the drama of the story, and the tone of voice of the Mariner.

Two verses later the ship had emerged from the mist, so the sun rises clear again, and the Mariner says it was "glorious" and "like God's own head" (ll. 101-02)—if anybody is condemned for saying such things, it should not be the crew but the Mariner. However, this is the moment when the crew say that it was right to kill the Albatross, as a creature which caused fog; and Mr Warren is deeply committed to the view that they deserved death for saying it. He goes on (240):

[H]ere we must observe a peculiar and cunningly contrived circumstance: the mariners do not accept the crime till the sun rises, and rises gloriously "like God's own head." The sun is, symbolically speaking, the cause of their acceptance of the crime — they read God as justifying the act on the ground of practical consequence, just as, shall we say, Bishop Paley would have done.

Well, but would Mr Warren have made the Bishop die of thirst for it? I think the Benthamite position is hardly more than common sense, but a discussion of it is often confusing; one needs a definite case. Suppose the ship had to take in water at a town with plague, and the watchman knew that rats carry plague, and saw a rat who had almost succeeded in reaching the ship along a stay-rope; would he be justified in shooting it? Ought he first to inquire whether it had attended evensong, like the Albatross? It could just as easily be taught to. We really do feel it was somehow dreadful to shoot the Albatross, but not that it would be dreadful to shoot the rat, and this proves that our reasons are not the ones alleged by Mr Warren. Certainly, we ought to feel a distaste for the false reasoning of the crew, but their logic is not typically scientific or materialist; it is typical of magicians, and Symbolists. That is why Symbolism is liable to become pernicious; it is inherently alien to the tradition of fair play and open public debate. And, of course, no one would trace, or impute, these deductions from the details about the sun unless his mind was full of the anti-rationalist doctrine already. As a "contrived" attack on Rationalism, the sequence would be footling.

We next have the crew dying of thirst when becalmed at the Equator, and here the sun really is terrible. But it is not called "bloody," in a "copper" sky (ll. 115-16) to symbolise an ethical doctrine; *The Road to Xanadu* showed us long ago that these are details from ships' captains' reports. Of course they might also be symbolic, but they occur because a special kind of fog has risen from the rotting sea. It is not admired; though, the last time we had a fog, Mr Warren said it was good. Then the Ghost-Ship arrives, during a sunset, and I think a comment of Mr Boulger, in his Introduction to the *Twentieth Century Interpretations* of the poem, deserves to be considered first. He supports the symbolism of Mr Warren, but rather incidentally. When the Ghost-Ship moves in front of the sun, he says:

This is the image of Satan laughing and cajoling the Mariner to ultimate scepticism and despair; it is the dark night, after custom has been found wanting, and the ultimate test of the spiritual Will that the Mariner survives by an act of faith alone, the blessing of the water-snakes.<sup>9</sup>

This interpretation needs to be set against the text:

The western wave was all a-flame.  
The day was well nigh done!  
Almost upon the western wave  
Rested the broad bright Sun;  
When that strange shape drove suddenly  
Betwixt us and the Sun.

And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,  
 (Heaven's Mother send us grace!)  
 As if through a dungeon-grate he peered  
 With broad and burning face.

Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud)  
 How fast she nears and nears!  
 Are those *her* sails that glance in the Sun  
 Like restless gossameres? (ll. 175-88)

"A very queer spectacle, likely to portend bad luck, if only because nothing like it has been seen before"—that seems a normal reaction; but the Mariner does just the opposite; he recognises the ship. He can hardly believe it; he is afraid of her coming nearer. When she is near enough he sees that she carries Life-in-Death, a lady, and we gather that he recognises her too; but they do not address one another. There is quite enough going on here without his recognising the Devil as a third old friend; the difference of sex, I agree, is all that prevents Life-in-Death from being the Devil, but that is sufficient. I think she is mainly the bad girl sailors meet in port, but the ship is much more special and much less familiar. The Mariner, at this first magical event in the poem, has a premonition of a Slaver, with its planks rotted off by the insanitary exudations of the dying slaves—that was going to be the final result of his heroic colonial exploration, and well might his heart beat loud. Coleridge really was writing in a Symbolist manner here, for once, and the effect on his readers would be fierce. So much indignation was building up in Bristol against this profitable trade, not really on theoretical grounds, since the abolition of slavery came much later, but because the process was too horrible, that it fairly soon had to be stopped (under Fox's administration, 1805). Coleridge himself, a year before, had written about these rotting planks, in his Bristol *Watchman*, and many of his first readers would feel certain he had glanced at the Slave Trade at this point in the poem, even if he had not wanted to.<sup>10</sup> But I expect he did want to, at this stage of the poem, before the narrative has established itself, so as to throw the first readers into a receptive condition. The terrible story of the Maritime Expansion had already become his theme.

Mr Boulger assumes that the central work of the Devil is to stop you from believing something, but this would not occur to the young Coleridge. It was terrible for him to lose faith in the spirits of Nature, a few years after writing the poem, but there is no foreboding of it here. I grant that the Mariner, only a page after, is being kept from prayer by a wicked whisper, which presumably said: "God is unjust." But the author was accustomed to see this as a consequence of the type of belief held by the Mariner. Forcing oneself to accept some incredible doctrine, insisted upon as its trademark by some organised Church, had not as yet any obsessive power over the mind of Coleridge; but it is still hag-riding Mr Boulger's mind when he gets to the blessing of the water-snakes. That was decisive because it was done "unaware" (321), not as an act of belief in anything, nor yet as an act of will. If what we see is the

Devil recommending scepticism, surely the line ought to be "With leering jeering face," and that is in itself almost a refutation—it would feel like *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* (I don't deny that the angels of the illustrator Doré might have played peekaboo, as well). And then, surely the Image ought to show the Devil at liberty, poking his head into the window to jeer at the imprisoned Mariner. But the iron grating over a ground-floor street window usually bulged out, to enlarge the view of the street from inside, and never bulged inward. The ribs of a wooden ship, of course, bulged out like the ribs of a man, so this Image would put the Devil inside a prison, or at least in a ship. Clearly the first comparison was to a domestic grate, with the sun as the cosy fire; Coleridge must have had some reason for making it a prison window, and the likely one at the time would be to define the Ghost-Ship as a Slaver.

The basic purpose of putting the skeleton ship in front of the sun is to demonstrate that it *is* a skeleton, and no one thinks that the sun is too. A setting sun does better than a rising one, being an analogue for death, but this is only because the *absence* of the sun is like death. The setting sun here is "broad," and earlier in the poem it was *broad as a weft*; as the poem is full of such echoes, we are probably meant to notice this quite simple one—it means that the ship is again meeting a fog, though of a different kind. Any fog would be a relief for the crew by saving it from the full power of the sun, and the word *broad* calls up calming associations; it certainly does not call up the Devil. In fact, the *contrast* between the sun and the skeleton is what makes the "emotional" effect too subtle for a Symbolist apparently, but too crude for a normal reader, and a normal reader feels that it "ought to mean something." I suppose, if a Symbolist heard a sermon devoted to warning him against Hell and recommending Heaven, he would feel that these terms, merely because they had been frequently contrasted, had been "emotionally equated." I wonder how Hartley's doctrine of Association got round this obstacle? Perhaps, in a remote way, the misreading is a judgement on the young Coleridge.

The essay uses several times a remark by Coleridge in the *Biographia*, that his early reading of Plotinus and suchlike had done him good even in his period of error:

. . . the writings of these mystics acted in no slight degree to prevent my mind from being imprisoned within the outline of any single dogmatic system. They contributed to keep alive the *heart* in the *head*; gave me an indistinct, yet stirring and working presentiment, that all the products of the mere *reflective faculty* partook of DEATH . . . .<sup>11</sup>

This is a bit of evidence, but what can we do with "mere"? *How much* Imagination would be enough to save a scientific theory, for example, from partaking of Death? The passage does not imply a very strong preference for obscurantism. In general, Mr Warren assumes that the young poet hated science, because all poets do, and used to do even in early times, but this belief was just a *fashion of the thirties*. It seems to have been regarded as an act of loyalty to T. S. Eliot, though I do not know that he ever supported it; I came

to think it merely expressed the jealousy felt by the Arts dons at the extra money needed to equip the Science dons. Perhaps the most startling example was the belief that Donne, by comparing faithful love to a pair of compasses, meant to jeer at love with Bitter Irony — he must have done, because all scientific equipment is materialistic, new-fangled, and low-class. Compasses felt vulgar because one had been made to use them in school lessons. But God in the Old Testament had used these compasses to create the world, and the aristocratic Greek philosophers had admitted the compasses but no other tool into pure geometry, so the misreading was peculiarly absurd; and indeed I have never found who invented it, having only read about it in critics who tenderly and hesitantly dissociate themselves. The monster seems to have risen of its own accord, from the grass roots of the valley bottoms. The mean-mindedness of this snooty line of talk had always made it a painful obstacle to understanding. The advances of science in our time, though very likely to cause disaster, have been so magnificent that I could not wish to have been born earlier; and I estimate that most of the poets worth study who were in fact born earlier would have felt so if they were alive now. If this is true, a historical critic who hugs the opposite sentiment is badly out of touch with his authors, at a point which may be important to the mental health of an imaginative man. There is another source of confusion here in that the Coleridge of 1815, when he settled our established text of the *Mariner*, had recently invented the frame of mind dominant among critics in 1930-50, but he was not at all like that when he wrote the poem, almost twenty years before.

Perhaps I may seize this opportunity to clear up a bit of nonsense about the line "The sun now rose upon the right." Herodotus mentions some Phoenician sailors who claimed to have sailed round the southern coast of Africa; he is willing to pass the story on, but doubts their extra claim to have had the sun on their right at some point. All critics agree that Coleridge borrowed his line from Herodotus, and Humphry House added a further poetic thought, saying that the Phoenicians had "doubled the Cape without knowing that there was a Cape."<sup>12</sup> Come now, if Herodotus and the Phoenician captain had been as unscientific as these critics are, they could hardly have found their way home across the home farm. The scientific doctrines needed are scarcely more than definitions of words: (a) the sun rises in the east; (b) if you have gone south, and want to go back, you have to go north; (c) when you are going north, the east is on your right. Herodotus could not conceivably have doubted any of them. The claim of the Phoenicians is made quite plain in the Loeb translation, II: 42 (though probably a bit of interpretation has been worked into the text here); they said that, when they were at the very south of Africa, sailing due west, the sun at midday was to the north of them. This proved that they had got to the antipodes, the southern half of the globe; and the doubt of Herodotus gives them credit for understanding the astronomy — if they didn't know what their story implied, they would have no temptation to invent it. I have observed that women do not like being with a man who is always lost,

and even the ladies in the *Fairie Queene* sometimes grumble at the total incapacity of their knights for orientation; with such encouragement, I really think that the affectation of literary critics to be above all mortal knowledge might be unbuckled an inch or two. Indeed, I hope that has already happened.

It is easy nowadays to find out whether Coleridge hated science before 1800, from the first volume of the *Collected Letters* (ed. E. L. Griggs, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956). In November 1796 he wrote to the father of Charles Lloyd, whom he was to tutor, giving his syllabus: "*Languages* will engross one or two hours in every day; the *elements* of Chemistry, Geometry, Mechanics, and Optics the remaining hours of study." Perhaps, he said, they might reach the study of Man later on (Letter 154). "I love Chemistry" he told Thelwall later in the week (Letter 156). In April 1797 he told his Bristol publisher Cottle how he would set about writing an epic poem (Letter 184):

I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to an Epic Poem. Ten to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable Mathematician, I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine . . .

This appetite for knowledge remained largely unsatisfied, but it was not a side-issue; he thought it part of the great work of understanding man's place in Nature. In January 1798 he wrote to his adviser [J. P.] Estlin, a Unitarian minister aged about fifty (Letter 221):

I regard every experiment that Priestly made in Chemistry, as giving *wings* to his more sublime theological works.

The twentieth-century literary attitude, reverencing Nature while refusing to learn what is known about her, would have seemed to him merely unintelligible.

The same volume also tells us the essentials about his religious position, though that is less clear-cut. He did call himself a Christian, meaning that he loved the character and precepts of Jesus, but he also maintained (though Mr Warren takes care not to) that the adherents of the established churches were not Christians. They were materialists (for example, they did not admit that every flower enjoys the air it breathes); and, what was worse, they were pretty certain to be devil-worshippers (accepting the Father who was satisfied by the crucifixion of his Son). In November 1794, writing to Southey, he had a spasm of horror at the thought of encountering his mother-in-law on the banks of the Susquehanna (Letter 68):

*That Mrs Fricker*—we shall have her teaching the Infants *Christianity*,—I mean—that mongrel whelp that goes under it's name—teaching them by stealth in some ague-fit of superstition!—

She might say that God would send them to Hell if they were naughty. A long letter to Southey in November 1795, which surveys his plan to become a clergyman, recalls how Coleridge had asked him what he would do if the



Bishop asked him about the Trinity and the Redemption, and Southey had said: "I am pretty well up to their Jargon" (Letter 93). So these two issues were among the most important ones (they seldom mention their actual heresies) – whether Jesus was God, whether the crucifixion of Jesus has bought off a tiny remnant of mankind from eternal torture by the Father. We should recognise that the orthodox account of the Father excited massive moral indignation; in May 1796, Coleridge wrote to the atheist [John] Thelwall that he liked [Thomas] Holcroft best, of his atheist friends, because he was so benevolent (Letter 127): "he *hates* God, 'with all his heart, with all his mind, with all his soul, & with all his strength.'" The torture-monster deserved it, so this was one of the points where a worshipper of the true God could sympathize with the atheists. Mr. Warren says (224), with an air of settling the matter, that Coleridge wrote Thelwall a long letter in December 1796 trying to convert him to Christianity; maybe, but the crucial passage beginning "the Religion, which Christ taught, is simply that . . ." does not say a word about buying off a remnant from eternal torture; the Redemption is totally ignored (Letter 164). Even among Unitarians, who deny that Jesus is God, Coleridge found an obstacle in the Lord's Supper, the chief ceremony of the Redemption; he wrote to Estlin in July 1797 that he would keep silent about this ceremony, but if he himself "performed or received" it in his present state of opinion "I should indeed be eating & drinking condemnation" (Letter 198). This gives strong confirmation to a report of Hazlitt, who was present when Coleridge received a letter from the Wedgwood brothers offering him a pension. He had just had an offer to become a Unitarian minister, but told Hazlitt that he would anyway not have accepted it without first clearing with them his views on the Lord's Supper, and on Infant Baptism.<sup>13</sup> His feelings about Baptism are spread out in a letter to Godwin (number 352) of 1800. His third child was feared to be dying, and the second had already died unbaptised; his wife cried, and the neighbours were indignant, and he had already given in but needed to let off steam before an understanding friend. Many people nowadays would call it boorish to reject the charming custom of infant baptism, and Coleridge does not object to absurdity, he says; he could prostrate himself before the dung-pellet of a Lama; but he feels this case to be different. And no wonder: it presumes belief in a God so wicked that he would inflict eternal torture on an infant unless a ritual had been performed that the infant could not understand; when the associates of Coleridge took his refusal so tragically, it became clear that they were worshipping the Devil, and ought to be discouraged. He does not expound the argument, which would be familiar to his reader; what is unexpected in the letter is the intimate loathing he feels for the professionals themselves. Coming from a clerical family, he was at home with the tone of clerical unction, indeed it became a temptation into which he often fell; and yet all the time he would be regarding it with nausea:

Shall I suffer the Toad of Priesthood to spurt out his foul juice in this Babe's Face? . . . while the fat paw of a Parson crosses his Forehead?

Finally, we need to hear Coleridge after he had accepted Anglicanism. In a letter of October 1806 (number 633), written as instruction to a young man [George Fricker], he has got about as near as he ever did towards gulping down the Redemption, "the *peculiar doctrine* of Christianity" as he calls it:

God of his goodness grant, that I may arrive at a more living Faith in these last, than I now feel. What I now feel is only a very strong *presentiment* of their Truth and Importance aided by a thorough conviction of the hollowness of all other Systems.

Now, a reader may feel that these points of theological difference are remote from his own interests; but they are not remote from the poem, nor yet from the Symbolist interpretation of the poem. The trouble is that the two things are totally opposed. Mr Warren writes more moderately than most of his successors, but he has a good deal about the "sacramental" view of Nature, and the mysterious "religious" importance of the killing of the Albatross, which necessitates suffering; indeed:

. . . we get a symbolic transference from Christ to the Albatross, from the slain Son of God to the slain creature of God. And the death of the creature of God, like the death of the Son of God, will, in its own way, work for vision and salvation. (230)

If Coleridge had tried to write such a poem, he would have been woken by one of his screaming-fits that same night, probably with hysterical vomiting and bowel action. He did at times feel that the doctrine of Redemption, though mere gross wickedness in the hands of the Churches, concealed some important truth: that was why it was so disturbing. One might suppose that a Freudian opposite was at work; that he had a shameful half-conscious craving to worship the Devil (the Father of the crucifixion), that this craving shaped the poem even though he sincerely pretended to himself that he was writing a parody of the doctrine, and that for the rest of his life the craving and the doctrine took their slow monstrous revenge. But I see no adequate reason to believe this romantic theory; certainly the hints dropped by Coleridge in later life, to the effect that he had written with inspired foreknowledge because he had always been an Anglican at bottom, are not adequate. One must remember that the guilt-haunted hero, Cain or the Wandering Jew, was accepted at the start simply as good material for a ballad, already stock. He might readily be thought to endure "Life-in-Death," so Mr Pirie and I felt we could keep the line about the associate of Death on the Ghost-Ship, "The Nightmare Life-in-Death was she" (l. 208); though it has often been regarded as the fruit of later wisdom, and Coleridge used it in his own epitaph. The earlier variants, I think, show Coleridge hunting round for this line and failing to hit on it. There are a number of points where the original intention is not satisfactorily carried out till the 1817 edition, and there is no reason why we should be deprived of them; one can believe that, and yet believe that the poem is immensely better once it has been rescued.

These general remarks arose from the crucial or central appearance of the sun in the poem, when the ship is becalmed; later in the poem we have two more appearances of the sun, which I have yet to consider. The spirits of the air arrive in a moonlit storm to work the ship, and we are not told that the Mariner fell into trance again, so it is the very next morning when the spirits leave the corpses and fly up to greet the sun. Many critics rationalise the story here, perhaps out of courtesy to the poet, who deserves to be saved from absurdity, so they take it that the corpses are the ones who really sing, and the Mariner only imagines that he hears the sound in the sky. This is quite untenable. The arms of the corpses drop (they seem paralysed) while "sweet sounds" (l. 390) emerge from their bodies, through their mouths; in the next verse the "sweet sounds" are observed circling round the ship (l. 392), so they are evidently spirits, audible though not visible. It is odd to reflect that the Mariner could check up on this, feeling that the evidence though astonishing was quite definite, and yet his experience could not be presented on the stage or the cinema or on television. Then the spirits "dart to the sun" (l. 393), a rather confusing phrase though I could not improve upon it. The sun is far away to the east, and its disc will soon appear there, but the quickest way to see it is to fly straight up, as the spirits do. The next two verses, both ringingly good, insist that the source of the sound is high up: *a-dropping from the sky*. . . . *That makes the heavens be mute* (ll. 396-404). Having finished their service or tribute, they fly down and resume their humble work, and so the corpses start pulling the ropes again. A reader has nothing to gain by refusing to understand what happens here.

Mr Warren pluckily recognises that the sun this time "appears in a 'good' association" (I wonder what he can have meant by his inverted commas round *good*? Maybe he was on the edge of realising that, if the spirits were angels, they would not indulge in pagan worship). He explains that it is "part of the general rejoicing when the proper order has been re-established in the universe" (245-46). Sure enough, the Mariner blessed the water-snakes a page or two before, but he is nowhere near out of his troubles, and surely the whole universe cannot be considered "redeemed" by this one action of the Mariner, just till the curse on him starts operating again? Also I cannot believe that his mind was ever "abstract." The theory becomes null here, and I think the reason is that Mr Warren genuinely does not think of the universe, in a poem, as being any different from the individual victim. They are both only "Symbols," anyway. But Coleridge even as late as in *Biographia Literaria* would have insisted that his reader needs at least to *imagine* believing in the superstitions, because otherwise he can never learn anything from them.

In the final incident concerning the sun I think Mr Warren does give a useful pointer. Coleridge needed to be sufficiently definite about his geography without sounding technical, so each of the three times the ship is at the Equator he says that the sun was above the mast at noon. Crossing it southwards, at the start of the poem, the Guest interrupts because he hears the bassoon, but evidently we do not lose much; then the terrible calm in the Pacific is treated at length, and the ship is withdrawn southwards and

westwards; finally it crosses the Line on the straight run home. The Mariner has become afraid of this position of the sun, so that he recognises it, but that does not explain what happens next. The poem, not only the Gloss, says that the Spirit of the South Pole has been pushing the ship, so far, but now it stops, on the Line. Some critic has proposed, rightly I expect, that this spirit is not allowed to cross the Equator; he has a good deal of latitude, but to let him trench on the domain of the Spirit of the North Pole would be absurd. The Gloss (l. 431) says:

The lonesome spirit from the south-pole carries on the ship as far as the Line, in obedience to the angelic troop, but still requireth vengeance.

(Why not *carrieth*? The Glosses are slovenly.) The next Gloss (l. 447) says he "accorded" a "penance long and heavy" for the Mariner, so he is willing to go home, the next (l. 476) that "the angelic power causeth the vessel to drive northward faster than a human life could endure." This does not hold together. The ship has been going at least 300 miles an hour on the previous half-day, while the Mariner was helping the spirits to pull the ropes, and it hardly can (on the evidence provided) go faster on the northern half of the run, while he is in a trance. Why did the spirits of the air use the Polar Spirit at all, if they can do better without him; and why are they never seen at work, after he is gone? According a long penance for the Mariner makes even more absurd the Gloss on the next page, saying that the curse on him is now finally expiated. Besides, there is nothing in the poem to support the idea of a belated negotiation. Indeed, a stern query by Humphry House begins to haunt the inquirer:

are the avenging by the tutelary spirits of the South Seas and the reanimation of the dead bodies to work the ship here just out of politeness, because Wordsworth suggested them?<sup>14</sup>

Well, come now, Coleridge believed that the world is crowded with many varieties of spirits, so he could afford to admit some extra ones into his poem; he had only the usual duty of a host, to find something for them to do. A landsman often feels let down, at this stage, when told that the Polar Spirit had been pushing the boat all the time, so that there was no need for work by the corpses. But he has been told from the start that there was no wind. I am assured that shoving the keel of a large sailing-ship would make a frightful jam-up unless the sails and rudder were attended to (the sails sing a tune, of course, because the still air moves backwards in relation to their movement). And this is the one stretch of the voyage where the ship goes very fast without the Mariner being unconscious, so the spirits are being highly skillful. What may still excite curiosity is how the Polar Spirit alone got the ship round the Cape; we must be content to know that he found the work a nuisance, and appealed for the help of the Spirits of the Air, who were then dancing in the antarctic aurora.

But who drove the ship north from the Equator, on the final stretch? Mr Warren of course accepts the Gloss, which at least appears to say that the angels did it; but he thinks they first had to tussle with the sun (246):

. . . at noon . . . when the sun is in its highest power . . . the sun resumes briefly its inimical role and prevents the happy forward motion of the ship . . . [T]he power of imagination seems to be turning away vengefully from the Mariner. But this crisis is passed, for after all the Mariner has been redeemed, and the ship plunges forward again with such suddenness that the Mariner is thrown into a "swound."

I thought at first that perhaps the Mariner was being fanciful, because it is unlike him to agree with Mr Warren. That is, he had really feared another calm at the Equator, so he imagined for a moment (foolishly, as he now admits) that the vertical sun was nailing the ship down. But it is unwise procedure to rationalise what the Mariner tells us, so as to make the story rather less magical; his life must anyway have been saved by magic, unless practically the whole story is a product of his imagination; and even then what he had imagined would be all we had available to examine. Still, I may yet differ from Mr Warren about the intention of the tropical sun, a point on which the Mariner does not pronounce. It was at its usual mysterious work, coaxing or teasing till it produced a sudden explosive change, like a birth, but often given some other name, for example among insects or plants. The results have a quality of random violence—one cannot really suppose that the Mariner needed to be knocked out again. Still, this was convenient in that it allowed him to overhear the two Voices who were discussing his fate; and the incidental question "What makes it go?" was answered by a riddle: "The air is cut away before, And closes from behind" (ll. 478-79). Mr. Warren calls this a scientific explanation (247), but his views on science need not further delay us. "Nobody does it; it does it for itself" would be a way to make sense of the riddle, and that is what the poetry describes:

The sails at noon left off their tune,  
And the ship stood still also.

The Sun, right up above the mast,  
Had fixed her to the ocean:  
But in a minute she 'gan stir,  
With a short uneasy motion—  
Backwards and forwards half her length  
With a short uneasy motion.

Then like a pawing horse let go  
She made a sudden bound:  
It flung the blood into my head,  
And I fell down in a swound. (ll. 435-46)

We should take this literally. As a result of its various supernatural experiences, the ship has come alive; it has become like the Ghost-Ship which "mov'd/ Like a Being of the Sea!" (ll. 196-97) That skeleton was first seen jerking about at random, like a fly, or like the creatures which used to live on the surface of horse-ponds; "As if it dodged a water-sprite, It plunged and tacked and veered" (ll. 159-60). When called by the Mariner it came straight to him, perhaps ordered to do so by its passengers; till then, its behaviour looked free. The production of another ship like that gives a last glimpse of the tropical sun, always throwing up wild feverish forms of life, but without malignity—most of them were unpleasant ones, but they included the water-snakes. Coleridge was unlikely to regard even an equatorial sun as wholly evil. In the same year as he wrote *The Ancient Mariner* he wrote (*Fears in Solitude*):

. . . the owlet Atheism,  
Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon,  
Drops his blue-fringéd lids, and holds them close,  
And hooting at the glorious sun in Heaven,  
Cries out "Where is it?"

Surely this is what Mr Warren and his supporters have praised Coleridge himself for doing in the *Mariner*? Even in the *Biographia Literaria*, where Nature has become invisible, the Imagination is still called "the sunshine comparative power."

Still, though you needn't quite blame the sun, to adopt an independent life is bad for a ship's character, and no doubt that authorities on the subject in Bristol had told Coleridge so; the Pilot and the Hermit, as soon as they set eyes on it, know that it looks like a Ghost, or a Fiend. The two Voices are water-spirits, so they knew that it would bear watching, as soon as it was transformed; they are the ones who come racing up under water to destroy it at the end, when it has agreed to help kidnap the Mariner. The only rather unsatisfactory question is why the corpses needed to "work" again for the kidnapping:

With silent pace, each to his place,  
Came back the ghastly crew. (582-83)

But we never gathered, even from Life-in-Death, how one communicates with a Ghost-Ship, and at least we are not told that the corpses pulled on more ropes. A ship so very like a horse could attend to its sails by its own muscular power; that is why we did not find anyone pulling ropes on the last lap of the voyage. The air-spirits could go to sleep on the last lap of their assignment; they were too unsuspecting, but then, it is agreed that all spirits are rather feckless, if well-intentioned. The Mariner was lucky to get away; there is a certain over-crowding in the final picture, but it conveys this thought.

I would agree, were it objected, that Coleridge had better have explained such things from the start by a system of Glosses; but he might well have felt, before people began bully-ragging him about the poem, that they were not

needed because the explanations would fit so well into the existing superstitions and popular assumptions. How dreadful the shock must have been when he had brought the poem into the lions' den of critics, and himself, despairing, took part in its destruction.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>William Empson and David Pirie, eds. *Coleridge's Verse: A Selection*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1972; reprinted as *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: an Experiment in Reading," *Kenyon Review*, VIII, 1946; reprinted in *Selected Essays* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964) 213-14. "I shall label the primary theme in this poem as the theme of sacramental vision, or the theme of the 'One Life'." Further references are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup>See John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986) 204-06.

<sup>4</sup>Coleridge opposed Lord Erskine's Bill for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; as John Colmer has remarked, "It is odd to think of the author of the last stanzas of *The Ancient Mariner* being opposed to so humane a measure. He opposed it on the grounds that it was an example of the dangerous principle of 'extending personality to things.'" *Coleridge: Critic of Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) 92-93. See also *Coleridge's Verse*, 42.

<sup>5</sup>See also *Coleridge's Verse*, 55.

<sup>6</sup>See also *Coleridge's Verse*, 49-50.

<sup>7</sup>See also *Coleridge's Verse*, 86.

<sup>8</sup>Letter to Danvers, *New Letters of Robert Southey*, vol. 1, 511, ed. Kenneth Curry (New York and London: Columbia U P); see also Barbara E. Rooke, ed., *The Friend*, vol. 4:11, 26, note 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); and *Coleridge's Verse*, 246-47.

<sup>9</sup>James D. Boulger, ed. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" — Introduction," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1969) 17.

<sup>10</sup>Lewis Patton, ed. *The Watchman*, no. IV, 25 March 1796 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) 138.

<sup>11</sup>James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, eds., S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 152.

<sup>12</sup>Humphry House, *Coleridge* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953) 94.

<sup>13</sup>"My First Acquaintance with Poets," in P. P. Howe, ed., *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 17 (London & Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1933) 113.

<sup>14</sup>House, *Coleridge*, 104