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The Meaning of The Ancient Mariner

Jerome J. McGann

What does “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” mean? This question, in one form or another, has been asked of the poem from the beginning; indeed, so interesting and so dominant has this question been that Coleridge’s poem now serves as one of our culture’s standard texts for introducing students to poetic interpretation. The question has been, and still is, an important one, and I shall try to present here yet another answer to it. My approach, however, will differ slightly from the traditional ones, for I do not believe that we can arrive at a synthetic answer until we reflect upon the meaning of the question itself. I will begin, therefore, by reconsidering briefly the history of the poem’s criticism.

1. *The Critical History*

From its first appearance in *Lyrical Ballads*, the “Rime” was an arresting, if problematic, work. Though well known to readers during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, no early consensus about the meaning or value of the poem was reached. Readers might praise Coleridge’s imitation of “the elder poets”—which is what Francis Wrangham, Wordsworth’s friend, had done—or they might, like Robert Southey, ridicule the act of imitation;¹ in either case, most early readers found

1. Wrangham’s review appeared in *The British Critic* 14 (October 1799), Southey’s in *The Critical Review* 24 (October 1798); both are quoted in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London, 1963), pp. 317–20, 313–14. For a good selection of early reviews, see *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (London, 1970).

the poem difficult to understand, mysterious, strange.² This response itself divided into two judgmental camps: on the one hand, those who, like Charles Lamb, valued the poem for its ability to keep “the mind . . . in a placid state of wonderments”; and, on the other, those who, like the anonymous *Analytical* reviewer, compared it to “the extravagance of a mad German poet.” Dr. Charles Burney’s conflicted set of remarks is entirely typical of the situation:

The author’s first piece, the *Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, in imitation of the *Style* as well as the spirit of the elder poets, is the strangest story of a cock and a bull that we ever saw on paper: yet, though it seems a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence, there are in it poetical touches of an exquisite kind.³

The “Rime” was the opening poem in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and these troubled reactions of the book’s first readers were a serious worry to Wordsworth:

From what I can gather it seems that The Ancyent Marinere has upon the whole been an injury to the volume, I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on. If the volume should come to a second edition I would put in its place some little things which would be more likely to suit the common taste.⁴

In the end the poem was not replaced, but its position was changed, its title was altered, and its archaic style was drastically modernized. All this was done at Wordsworth’s insistence, but not every reader was pleased with the result. Lamb was dismayed because the alterations had the effect of rationalizing the strange beauty of the poem:

I am sorry that Coleridge has christened his *Ancient Marinere*, a *Poet’s Reverie*; it is as bad as Bottom the Weaver’s declaration that he is not a lion, but only the scenical representation of a lion. What new idea

2. See Richard Haven, “The Ancient Mariner in the Nineteenth Century,” *Studies in Romanticism* 11 (1972), esp. pp. 365–68.

3. *The Analytical Review* 28 (December 1798); Burney’s review was in *The Monthly Review* 29 (June 1799); see *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, ed. Brett and Jones, pp. 314–17.

4. Wordsworth to Cottle, 24 June 1799, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester Shaver, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1967), 1:264.

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is gained by this title but one subversive of all credit—which the tale should force upon us—of its truth.⁵

Lamb was right, of course, but then so was Wordsworth: each simply had a different way of responding to the poem's "obscurity." Coleridge, typically, had his own special response: to expound at length with "metaphysical elucidations" the profound "mysteries" of his ballad imitation. Coleridge's interlocutor on this occasion—in Germany, from 1798–99—was Clement Carlyon, who did not find Coleridge's commentary much more lucid than the ballad and who later poked fun at Coleridge's explanations when he was recollecting the events.⁶

During Coleridge's lifetime the poem was recognized to have an intellectual or allegorical import, even—witness the essay by J. G. Lockhart—a religious or visionary significance.⁷ These impressions remained inchoate until the mid-century, however, when critics first began to develop explicitly symbolic and allegorical interpretations. Those mid-Victorian readings established the hermeneutic models which have dominated the subsequent history of the poem's interpretations. Though details and emphases have changed and shifted, and though the commentaries have become more extended, the fundamental interpretive approach has not altered significantly since that time.⁸ Those who have veered away from such interpretations do so not by developing alternative hermeneutic methods but by rejecting the approach at more fundamental levels. Thus E. E. Stoll and Elisabeth Schneider deny that Coleridge ever "intended" his poem to be read symbolically or allegorically; on the other hand, Irving Babbitt, William Empson, and David Pirie reject the entire Christian-symbolic schema not because it is unintended but because it is trivial.⁹ Rather than simply dismiss the poem, as Babbitt does, Empson and Pirie go on to solve the problem by substituting one (trivial) text with another (important) one: that is to say, they argue the necessity of reading the poem in its 1798 rather than in its 1817 version.

This brief analytic summary of the poem's interpretive tradition is necessary if we are to come to grips with the problem of the "Rime" and

5. Lamb, *The Letters of Charles Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 3 vols. (London, 1935), 1:240.

6. See Clement Carlyon quoted in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Jackson, pp. 197–204.

7. J. G. Lockhart, "Essay on the Lake School," *Blackwood's Magazine* 6 (1819); see also the anonymous reviews of *Sibylline Leaves* in *London Magazine* (July 1820) and *The Monthly Review* (January 1819).

8. See Haven, "The Ancient Mariner in the Nineteenth Century," pp. 370–74.

9. See E. E. Stoll, "Symbolism in Coleridge," *PMLA* 63 (1948): 214–33; Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium, and "Kubla Khan"* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 252–55; Irving Babbitt, "Coleridge and Imagination," *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (Boston, 1932), pp. 116–20; and William Empson and David Pirie, eds., *Coleridge's Verse: A Selection* (New York, 1973).

its meaning; for meaning, in a literary event, is a function not of “the poem itself” but of the poem’s historical relations with its readers and interpreters. As we shall see, when the history of the “Rime”’s hermeneutics is traced to the ballad’s point of origin, we begin to understand how the work developed under the dominion of Coleridge’s own hermeneutic models. To see this last point in its full historical particularity is to arrive, finally, at a *critical* vantage on the poem. For not until we see that our dominant interpretive tradition has been licensed and underwritten by Coleridge himself will we be able to understand the meaning of that tradition, and hence the meaning of the meanings of the “Rime.” Richard Haven has said that the poem “seems to rule out few of the interpretations which have been offered” during the past one hundred and eighty years; and his further argument—that modern interpretations represent variant rather than alternative versions of nineteenth-century commentaries—is a point equally well taken.¹⁰ The full significance of Haven’s findings emerges when we come to see the relation of these facts to Coleridge himself and to the hermeneutic traditions which he helped to establish in the academy.

2. *Early Textual History: The Formal Significance*

Everyone knows that the “Rime” underwent a series of major textual alterations between 1798, when it first appeared in *Lyrical Ballads*, and 1817, when Coleridge all but completed his revisions in the *Sibylline Leaves* collection of his verse. These revisions included additions, subtractions, and changes in the verse text; changes in the poem’s title and prefatory material; and, most dramatic of all, the addition of the prose gloss in the textual margin.

Let me begin with the gloss, which to this day most readers take to represent at least one level of Coleridge’s own interpretation of his poem. M. H. Abrams, for example, takes this view for granted: “Coleridge added [the gloss] to assist the bewildered readers of the first published version” in interpreting the poem’s symbolic Christian narrative.¹¹ Even critics who, unlike Abrams, dislike the gloss share his view of its function and status. Pirie’s comments, for instance, illustrate the sort of problems which arise when the status of the gloss is misconceived in this way. The

10. See Haven, “The Ancient Mariner in the Nineteenth Century,” p. 361. The general uniformity of approach to the poem’s formal and thematic aspects is illustrated quite clearly in the various contemporary handbooks and student guides: see esp. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,”* ed. James D. Boulger (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969) and *“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”: A Handbook*, ed. Royal A. Gettmann (Belmont, Calif., 1966). The point is also nicely illustrated in John Beer’s excellent *Coleridge the Visionary* (London, 1959), chap. 5.

11. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971), p. 272.

following passage appears in Pirie's longer argument for taking the 1798 rather than 1817 version as the base-reading text:

The most serious attempt to distract the reader from the poem in the *Sibylline Leaves* version is of course the addition in the margin of the ageing Coleridge's own interpretation of his poem. Partly just a feeble literary joke, this must have always been intended to confuse the unwary as indeed it continues to do. Whether Coleridge was optimistic enough to hope that the marginalia would be regarded as much a part of the poem proper as they now are is debatable. But the marginalia are by their very nature perverting. They are a third-person, and thus by implication objectively true, account of a story whose essence is that it is a first-person narrative. Its full title, its narrative framework of the hypnotized listener, its disturbing vividness, all stress that it is at once event and account. The poem breaks through simplistic distinctions between "subjective feeling" and "objective reality". It concentrates by its very form on the fact that the mariner is condemned to recurring moments of "total recall" of which this is but a single example, condemned to experience again all that he felt alone on the wide, wide sea. The marginalia turn the speaker into a specimen. Worse, they lie. It is clearly not true, nor ever could be, that "the curse is finally expiated" and the very real creature that the mariners fed on biscuit-worms cannot become "a pious bird of good omen" without being ludicrous. To tell the reader in the margin that it is a good omen, when the succeeding stanzas demonstrate how impossible it is until too late to tell whether it is of good or bad omen, is to make nonsense of the poem at its very core. Coleridge claimed that Walter Scott's handling of superstition put the writer in a damagingly superior position to his story: "that discrepance between the Narrator and the Narrative chills and deadens the Sympathy." The narrator in the marginalia puts a similarly cold distance between the reader's sympathy and the story as experienced by the mariner.¹²

First, some preliminary explanations. Pirie speaks of the gloss as "a feeble literary joke" because he recognizes its antique character. When he calls it a "third-person" account, he points toward an important fact about the gloss, but he seems to miss the significance of that fact. Finally, his discussion of the gloss's "lies" also registers an important fact whose function Pirie seems once again to overlook.

We may begin to unravel the problems raised by Pirie (and preserved as well in nearly all contemporary interpretations) if we return to the poem's initial publication. The "Rime," as noted above, was the opening poem in Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. This 1798 version tries to adhere so closely to the conventions of ancient balladry, which Coleridge adapted from Thomas Percy, that the work sometimes ap-

12. Pirie, *Coleridge's Verse*, ed. Empson and Pirie, pp. 214–15.

proaches pastiche. This quality in the early “Rime”—its status as an imitation or literary ballad—sets it quite apart from all the other ballad-influenced poems written for *Lyrical Ballads*. The others are not literary ballads but lyrical ballads, a very different thing altogether.

When a second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was called for in 1800, Wordsworth, as we have seen, urged Coleridge to make some alterations. His views carried the day, and the result was a conscious attempt, acutely registered by Lamb, to make the “Rime” appear less a literary ballad and more a lyrical ballad. Archaisms were removed from the verse text, but the most important alterations came at the beginning. The title was changed from “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” to “The Ancient Mariner: A Poet’s Reverie,” and the 1798 Argument, which was archaic and slightly mysterious,

How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by Storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical Latitutde of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Marinere came back to his own Country,

became more descriptively straightforward:

How a Ship, having first sailed to the Equator, was driven by Storms, to the cold Country towards the South Pole; how the Ancient Mariner cruelly, and in contempt of the laws of hospitality, killed a Sea-bird; and how he was followed by many and strange Judgements; and in what manner he came back to his own Country.

The former, archaic in style, is appropriate to a literary ballad; the latter, on the other hand, remains in a contemporary idiom that perfectly marries with the new, self-conscious title. Lamb did not like the distance which the 1800 changes enforced between the “mariner’s ballad” and “Coleridge’s poem.” Changes like these broke the spell under which Lamb’s belief, in 1798, had been willingly suspended.

Pirie’s (and Empson’s) discussion of the “Rime” is fundamentally akin to Lamb’s: all three prefer the work in its most primitive character and appearance. This is a poem in which Coleridge *in propria persona* seems most thoroughly removed from his own work. When Empson and Pirie object to the further changes introduced into the work in 1817—and principally to the addition of the gloss—they argue that these alterations represent a further, and even worse, modernization (“the ageing Coleridge’s own interpretation of his poem”). In fact, however, Coleridge’s 1817 additions were a complex effort to represent (if also to methodize) his poem as a literary ballad. In this he worked on two fronts especially: first, to strengthen the original archaic aspect of the work;

and second, to carry even further the process, begun in 1800, of distinguishing as it were "levels of authority" or points of view in terms of which the poetic events were to be experienced and narrated.

When Pirie called the gloss a third-person account, he drew attention to the distance between the attitude represented in the gloss and that represented in the verse text conceived as imitation archaic ballad. For the truth is that the verse narrative and the prose gloss present themselves in Coleridge's poem as the work of two distinct (fictional) personages. The verse narrative appears as one "received text" of an early English ballad, a type that Percy called an "old minstrel ballad" and that Scott, later, called a "romantic ballad."¹³ When Coleridge printed his poem in 1817, however, he added the prose gloss, which is to say he added to his work a fictive editor of the (presumptively) ancient ballad text. In an important and much neglected article, Huntington Brown demonstrates very clearly the distinctive character of these two figures in Coleridge's poem, and he shows that (a) the minstrel's ballad is meant to be seen as dating from the time of Henry VII or thereabouts—in any case, certainly after the voyage of Columbus but prior to the age of Shakespeare—and (b) the editor is a later figure still, a scholar and an antiquarian whose prose indicates that he lived sometime between the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries.¹⁴

As Brown has shown, this fundamental distinction between the verse text and the gloss has two principal effects. First, it "serves to emphasize the remoteness of the story and its teller by setting them off at two removes" from the contemporary reader. Second, it calls attention to the multiple points of view which are embedded in the total work. Brown distinguishes "the personality of the Mariner who reports [the voyage], . . . the Wedding-Guest who listens [to the story], . . . the minstrel [who authors the verse] and, finally, . . . the pious antiquarian [who edits the ballad]."¹⁵ As we shall see, Coleridge's "Rime" in fact presents yet another point of view—that is, Coleridge's, or the contemporary author's—who operates in a determining way, controlling all the others.

The textual changes which the "Rime" underwent between 1798 and 1817 tell an important story about Coleridge's developing purposes toward his poem. These changes, in fact, highlight the formal poetic terms within which all interpretations of the poem must take place. Before we can take up the hermeneutical problem, however, we must

13. See Thomas Percy's, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, ed. J. V. Prichard, 2 vols. (London, 1905), 1:xlili, and Walter Scott's introduction to *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. Thomas Henderson, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1902), 1:168–73; see also Scott's "Modern Imitations," *ibid.*, 1:173–76, and his "Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad," *ibid.*, 4:1–52.

14. Huntington Brown, "The Gloss to the Ancient Mariner," *Modern Language Quarterly* 6 (1945): 319–20.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 322, 324.

elucidate more clearly the historical significance of the textual events. Empson and Pirie regard the process of revision as a reactionary movement in which a daring and radical poem is transformed into a relatively tame work of Christian symbolism. For them, the textual changes tell the story of Coleridge's scandalous ideological retreat from his radical views of the 1790s to his later Christian orthodoxy. Their position eventually places the poem's entire interpretive tradition of criticism under an inquisition;¹⁶ for this tradition, in their view, has merely carried forward into our own day symbolic Christian interpretations sanctioned by "the ageing Coleridge."

As I shall try to show in the next section, Pirie and Empson have accurately represented the historical relation between Coleridge's developed theory of hermeneutics and the later, dominant tradition of interpretation. Important as it is, however, their attack upon the established critical tradition needs to be revised historically. That is to say, we must look again, much more carefully than Empson and Pirie have done, at the sorts of continuities which exist between the "radical" Coleridge of the 1790s and the Sage of Highgate. Not only do Empson and Pirie misrepresent Coleridge when they characterize the history of his religious convictions; what is worse, they fail to see the relation of his religious ideas to the "Rime" either at the poem's point of origin in the late 1790s or at its later stages of revision up to 1817.

3. Coleridge's Hermeneutic Models: 1792–1834

At his death in 1834, Coleridge left his manuscript treatise *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* in which he set forth his most mature and coherent thoughts "on the Inspiration of the Scriptures." Indeed, the essay sums up the developed state of Coleridge's ideas from their first emergence in the early 1790s to their latest—and in many ways most radical—form. Coleridge's marginal glosses on J. G. Eichhorn, Gotthold Lessing, and Johann Gottfried von Herder, his *Lay Sermons*, the *Aids to Reflection*, and all of Coleridge's scattered commentary on the issues of the Higher Criticism are gathered together and summed up in the *Confessions*.

In the *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge condemned "the pretended right of every individual competent and incompetent, to interpret Scripture in a sense of his own, in opposition to the judgment of the Church, without knowledge of the originals or of the languages, the history, the customs, opinions, and controversies of the age and country in which

16. J. R. Ebbatson's "Coleridge and the Rights of Man" (*Studies in Romanticism* 11 [1972]: 171–206) contains an interesting discussion of some of the poem's historical intersections; it consciously follows the line opened by Empson in his 1964 *Critical Quarterly* essay, "The Ancient Mariner," in which his view on the poem initially appeared.

they were written.”¹⁷ The *Confessions* explains Coleridge’s view more clearly when he rejects the conservative theological position which insists upon the immediate divine authority for every word and line in the Bible:

Why should I not believe the Scriptures throughout dictated, in word and thought, by an infallible Intelligence? . . . Why should I not?—Because the doctrine evacuates of all sense and efficacy the sure and constant tradition, that all the several books bound up together in our precious family Bible were composed in different and widely distant ages, under the greatest diversity of circumstances, and degrees of light and information, and yet that the composers, whether as uttering or as recording what was uttered and what was done, were all actuated by a pure and holy Spirit, one and the same—(for is there any spirit pure and holy, and yet not proceeding from God—and yet not proceeding in and with the Holy Spirit?)—one Spirit, working diversly, now awakening strength, and now glorifying itself in weakness, now giving power and direction to knowledge, and now taking away the sting from error! [AC, pp. 305–6]

Coleridge’s view is that the Scriptures are, as it were, a living and progressive organism, one that comes into existence in human time and continues to develop in that “fallible” and limited sphere. This view leads him to affirm that the Bible is indeed the Word of God, but that its Word is uttered by God’s mortal creatures:

Every sentence found in a canonical Book, rightly interpreted, contains the *dictum* of an infallible Mind;—but what the right interpretation is,—or whether the very words now extant are corrupt or genuine—must be determined by the industry and understanding of fallible, and alas! more or less prejudiced theologians. [AC, p. 316]

Such a historical view of the Scriptures leads Coleridge along a radical path to a relatively conservative stance as regards the authority of the Church. Each new generation, and every new reader of the Bible, must listen to the assembled “panharmonicon” which is the Church’s authority, that is, its recorded history of those who read and interpreted the Scriptures in the enthusiasm and the faith that was peculiar to their age and circumstances. The faith of the historical Church must be the model for the contemporary faithful. God’s eternal Word is expressed and later reexpressed through commentary, gloss, and interpretation by particular people at different times according to their differing lights.

17. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection and The Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (London, 1893), p. 200 n; all further citations to this work, abbreviated as AC, will be included in the text.

The sting is taken out of whatever error they may introduce by the existence of their faith, by their enthusiasm for the Word and the diffusion of the Word, and by their participation in the continuous historical process of incarnation.

As Elinor Shaffer has shown, these views represent Coleridge's particular reformulation of the Higher Critical approaches of men like C. G. Heyne, J. D. Michaelis, Alexander Geddes, Lessing, F. A. Wolf, Herder, and Eichhorn—that is, of the leading figures in the new approaches to textual criticism which were being most radically pursued in Germany. The theoretical foundations of this movement were laid by the mythographic, philological, and historical exegetes of the eighteenth century who studied various sorts of ancient texts and cultures—classical, oriental, biblical, and national. In her discussion of this movement, Shaffer has shown that Coleridge was not merely influenced by its work, he himself emerged as one of its principal and most important representatives.¹⁸

Like the other founders of the Higher Criticism, Coleridge was not trying to use its methods to destroy religion but to salvage it. The program resulted in what Shaffer calls “a new form of history” as well as a mythological hermeneutics which dominated Western thought for over a century and which continues, to this day, to exercise considerable authority, especially in the literary academy (p. 32). Shaffer describes very well the originary circumstances in terms of the famous problem of the “authenticity” of the Scriptures:

Coleridge's argument reflects a long struggle of the new criticism with the idea that an eye-witness account must be of special value. If, by their own critical endeavour, it became clear that none of the Gospels was an eye-witness account, the status of the “event” therein recounted must, on the old view, be diminished, its credibility undermined; but if there are no such privileged accounts, if all event is interpretation, than the Gospels need not suffer. Indeed, as we shall see, their value as literature is increased. For Coleridge, “event” and “mystery” must be expressed with equal delicacy, obliquity, and restraint. The miracle becomes the paradigm of reported historical event; the historical events reported by eye-witnesses represent instantaneous mythmaking. “Erkennen ist mythologisieren.” [Pp. 46–47]

Such a view of experience (it is to this day a prevalent one) carries with it a wholly revised sense of “tradition” and “authority”:

18. See Elinor Shaffer, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem* (Cambridge, 1975), esp. chaps. 1–3; all further citations to this work will be included in the text. This is a work of real importance for students of Romanticism as well as for Coleridge scholars.

It is neither the unquestioned authority of the Church nor the unquestioned authority of the Biblical text on which tradition rests, but the perpetually shifting sense within the Christian community of what has the power to persuade its members and strengthen them in the faith. Coleridge was to develop these two, still embryonic, approaches into one in his later writings: whatever the literal, documentable truth might be found to be, the historical experience of conviction within the Christian community was in itself a form of validation, and this experience could be maintained and reawakened through an imaginative grasp of what that experience had been.

As Shaffer goes on to remark, "These concerns were, of course, at the centre of romantic aesthetics" (pp. 85–86).

Coleridge's explicit, extended prose discussions of the leading figures and ideas dealt with by the Higher Critics were not made until after he went to Germany in 1798. Nevertheless, that he was earlier thoroughly familiar with the general approach and with the work of Heyne, Michaelis, Lessing, and Geddes is absolutely certain.¹⁹ Shaffer dates Coleridge's acquaintance with this critical tradition from the late 1780s, but her estimate may be too early. Still, by 1792 Coleridge was fully aware of these important scholarly developments, though his own views were, at that point, still fairly traditional. In 1795, for example, Coleridge was still arguing that Moses had authored the Pentateuch.²⁰ By 1796 his views had begun to show some considerable alterations, however, for in his "Essay on Fasts" we find him arguing that the "coincidence of the number of days [between Elijah's and Pythagoras' forty-day fastings] seems to cast a shade of doubt on the genuineness of the beginning of the fourth chapter of Matthew and Luke: in which the same miraculous circumstance is related of our Savior." Coleridge's method of reasoning here plainly follows a Higher Critical line:

It was the policy of the early Christians to assimilate their religion to that of the Heathens in all possible respects. The ceremonies of the Romish church have been traced to this source by Middleton; the miraculous conception is a palpable imitation of the story of Romulus, the son of a vestal virgin, by the descent of a Deity; and so, I suppose, because Pythagoras fasted forty days, the Interpolators of the Gospels must needs palm the same useless prodigy on Jesus. Indeed the conversion of the Heathens to Christianity, after the first century, does very much resemble Mahomet's miracle: as

19. For Geddes, see *ibid.*, pp. 24–34; Coleridge's 1795 "Lectures on Revealed Religion" were written with Michaelis in hand; and Coleridge refers to Heyne—who was, indeed, a giant figure in scholarly circles—in his *Notebooks* of 1796 (see *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 3 vols. [New York, 1957], 1: no. 278).

20. See Coleridge's *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton, N.J., 1971), p. 118.

the mountain would not come over to him, he went over to the mountain.²¹

The set of Coleridge's mind revealed in this passage differs very little from what is to be found later in his annotations to Herder and Eichhorn, in the *Lay Sermons*, and in the *Aids and Confessions*. The only marked difference is a tonal one: for the later Coleridge would not have permitted even the suggestion of jocularity in his discussion of such weighty matters. Interpolations and glosses in the text of Scripture by later writers, redactors, and scribes was a matter for the most serious thought and analysis.

The plainest evidence for the continuity of Coleridge's thought lies, however, in the coincidence of ideas between his 1796 "The Destiny of Nations" (see especially ll. 13–126) and his later prose writings. Coleridge says in his early poem, for example, that the highest form in which "Freedom" appears is the following:

But chiefly this, him First, him Last to view
Through meaner powers and secondary things
Effulgent, as through clouds that veil his blaze.
For all that meets the bodily sense I deem
Symbolical, one mighty alphabet
For infant minds;

[ll. 15–20]

This theory of symbolism is well known from "The Aeolian Harp" and *The Statesman's Manual*.²² In "The Destiny of Nations," Coleridge develops his thought in some detail:

So by a strange and dim similitude
Infinite myriads of self-conscious minds
Are one all-conscious Spirit, which informs
With absolute ubiquity of thought
(His one eternal self-affirming act!)
All his involved Monads, that yet seem
With various province and apt agency
Each to pursue its own self-centering end.

[ll. 42–49]

Implicit in both of these passages is Coleridge's further range of thought which he expands upon later in the poem: that God's self-revelation through the "apt agency" of finite, historical beings is a processive event. When Coleridge presents his example from primitive Lapland

21. Coleridge, *The Watchman*, ed. Patton (Princeton, N.J., 1970), p. 52.

22. For *The Statesman's Manual*, see *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (Princeton, N.J., 1972), pp. 29–31 and 70–73.

culture (ll. 60–126), his point is that the “Wild phantasies” of Greenland’s epic lore are full of deep import. Not only is such primitive lore symbolic, it illustrates the developing historical operation of the One Life:

For Fancy is the power
That first unsensualises the dark mind,
Giving it new delights; and bids it swell
With wild activity; and peopling air,
By obscure fears of Beings invisible,
Emancipates it from the grosser thrall
Of the present impulse, teaching Self-control,
Till Superstition with unconscious hand
Seat Reason on her throne.

[ll. 80–88]

The “legends terrible” (l. 90) teach, immediately, certain fundamental human virtues, but ultimately they operate as part of a vast, worldwide, spiritualizing scheme:

Till from Bethabra northward, heavenly Truth
With gradual steps, winning her difficult way,
Transfer their rude Faith perfected and pure.

[ll. 124–26]

The “Beings of higher class than Man”—God and his angels—“choose their human ministers” (ll. 127, 130) to carry out a providential economy; and each historical period raises up its ministers of this continuous revelation. When Coleridge writes “The Destiny of Nations,” he reveals himself to be an important functionary in the scheme he himself is articulating.

These ideas coincide fundamentally with what Coleridge says later in the works already cited. A repetition of this important point, however, is not out of order. In the *Confessions*, for example, Coleridge argues at length that the Scriptures are not an unmediated and fixed biblical text but an evolved and continuously evolving set of records which include the Church’s later glosses on and interpretations of the earlier documents. The entire project of textual transmission and elucidation is a symbolic, revelatory act: “all the intermediate applications and realizations of the words are but types and repetitions—translations, as it were, from the language of letters and articulate sounds into the language of events and symbolical persons?” (AC, p. 303). As a result, Coleridge goes on to argue that every person should approach the Scriptures with a double understanding. First, readers must see that the received documents—primitive texts, interpolations, commentaries—report historically mediated materials and hence must be “examined each in reference to the circumstances of the Writer or Speaker, the dispensation under

which he lived, the purpose of the particular passage, and the intent and object of the Scriptures at large" (AC, p. 320). Second, the reader must also understand that he is, as a reader, equally subject to time-specific cultural limitations: "the conflicts of grace and infirmity in your own soul, will enable you to discern and to know in and by what spirit they spake and acted,—as far at least as shall be needful for you, and in the times of your need" (AC, p. 320).

This is Coleridge's version of "a man speaking to men." Having a more explicitly historicized theoretical view than Wordsworth, however, Coleridge is able to see that the communication involves contact between what we would today call ideologically committed beings—between individuals whose humanness seems complete because they appear so thoroughly involved in their social and cultural milieux. As Coleridge had said earlier in *The Statesman's Manual*:

And in nothing is Scriptural history more strongly contrasted with the histories of highest note in the present age than in its freedom from the hollowness of abstractions. While the latter present a shadow-fight of Things and Quantities, the former gives us the history of Men, and balances the important influence of individual Minds with the previous state of the national morals and manners, in which, as constituting a specific susceptibility, it presents to us the true cause both of the Influence itself, and of the Weal or Woe that were its Consequents.²³

This sure grasp that the concreteness and particularity of an individual is a function of his ideology ("national morals and manners") is an important aspect of Coleridge's thought to which I shall return later.

4. *The "Rime" and the Critical Tradition*

As far as the "Rime" is concerned, we have to note the special importance of certain aspects of this body of thinking. I refer specifically to the idea, which Coleridge explicitly endorsed, that the biblical narratives were originally bardic (oral) poetry which gradually evolved into a cycle of communal literary materials. Embedded in primitive and legendary saga, the Scriptures grew by accretion and interpolation over an extended period of time. They do not represent a "true" narrative of certain fixed original events; rather, they are a collection of poetic materials which represent the changing form of "witness" or testament of faith created by a religious community in the course of its history.²⁴ The function of the Higher Criticism, as a method, was to reveal the various

23. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

24. See Shaffer, "*Kubla Khan*" and the *Fall of Jerusalem*, pp. 75–79.

"layers" of this poetic work by distinguishing the Bible's different religious/poetic styles, or forms of expression, from the earliest and most primitive to the latest and most sophisticated.

This general approach toward historically transmitted texts produced two specific theories which bear particularly on the "Rime." Geddes' "Fragment Hypothesis" argued that the Pentateuch "was put together by an editor out of a collection of independent and often conflicting fragments."²⁵ Coleridge accepted this interpretation but modified it by arguing that the conflation of the disparate fragments was a communal process rather than a unique event.

The second theory, put forth by Wolf in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795), argued that the *Iliad* was a redaction of different lays which had been passed down through a bardic tradition. Wolf's ballad theory of the epic partly drew its inspiration from the scholarship developed in the writings of the ballad revival. The argument in Percy's influential "Essay on the Ancient Minstrels of England," which introduced his *Reliques*, is paradigmatic. According to Percy, England's ancient poetic traditions from the pagan skalds to the old Christian minstrels was a continuous one; and although "the Poet and the Minstrel early with us became two persons," "the ancient minstrels" preserved in their ballad and song traditions a profound continuity with the old pagan skalds. Indeed, the common practice of the ancient minstrels—in contrast to the new, developing line of leisured poets—was not to compose new works but to adapt and extend the older ones which descended through the tradition from primitive pagan times.²⁶

The foregoing is the ideological framework for the following remarkable passage. The quotation is Coleridge's marginal gloss in his copy of Eichhorn's *Einleitung in das alte Testament* and is itself a theory, or explanation, of the meaning of glosses and textual interpolations. Commenting on Genesis 36:31, Coleridge writes:

But why *not* consider this as a gloss introduced by the Editors of the Pentateuch, or Preparers of the Copy that was to be layed up in the Temple of Solomon? The authenticity of the Books would be no more compromised by such glosses, than that of the Book before me by this marginal Note of mine.²⁷

Coleridge means that, given a coherent cultural tradition, the text which exhibits marks of its historical passage (in the form of later interpolations, glosses, and other textual additions and "impurities") retains its ideological coherence despite the process of apparent fragmentation. Such

25. See *ibid.*, p. 78.

26. See Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, pp. xxiii–xxvi and nn.

27. Coleridge quoted in Shaffer, "Kubla Khan" and the Fall of Jerusalem, p. 79.

a text is, in truth, a Book of Revelation by itself, an apocalypse of its evolved and interconnected poetic/religious coherences.

When Coleridge applies these critical views to non-Scriptural texts, as he does in "The Destiny of Nations," his idea is that the pagan bards of Greenland initiated a body of poetic material whose traditions culminated in the Christian revelation. Ancient "superstition," in these poetic repositories, will eventually "Seat Reason on her throne" through the processive movement of spiritual history. The textual history of primary epic and ballad materials exhibits in a concrete way the process of continuous spiritual revelation.

The "Rime" is presented as just this sort of text, and its own bibliographical history illustrates *in fact* what Coleridge fictively represents his poem to be *in imagination*. The special significance of the gloss, as far as the "Rime" is concerned, lies in its (imagined) historical relation to the ancient ballad which Coleridge has represented through his poem. By the time Coleridge has "evolved" his 1817 text, we are able to distinguish four clear layers of development: (a) an original mariner's tale; (b) the ballad narrative of that story; (c) the editorial gloss added when the ballad was, we are to suppose, first printed; and (d) Coleridge's own point of view on his invented materials. This last represents Coleridge's special religious/symbolic theory of interpretation founded upon his own understanding of the Higher Critical analytic.

From Coleridge's viewpoint, the "Rime" is a poem which illustrates a special theory of the historical interpretation of texts. In its earliest state (1798), the theory is not easy to deduce, though it is certainly in operation; when the glosses are added, however, Coleridge has extrapolated fully, and thereby made explicit, his religious theory of interpretation which has its roots in the Higher Critical tradition.

Like all literary ballads, the "Rime" is a tour de force, for Coleridge built it according to theories of the ballad (and of other historically transmitted works) which he had studied and which he expected his readers to know and to recognize. Certain stylistic facts about the poem demonstrate—on the authority of Percy—that the text has material which "dates back" to the early lays of the ancient minstrels.²⁸ On the other hand, other stylistic aspects of the text, including the gloss, show that its "date" is relatively late, certainly after Columbus, but perhaps before Magellan's voyage to the Pacific. In general, Coleridge means us to understand that the ballad narrative dates from the sixteenth century, that the gloss is a late seventeenth-century addition, and, of course, that Coleridge, at the turn of the nineteenth century, has provided yet another (and controlling) perspective upon the poetic material. Indeed, Coleridge certainly intended his more perspicuous readers—that is,

28. See Percy's discussion in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (pp. xlii–xliii) of the diction of the ancient minstrels (e.g., the accentuation of words like Coleridge's "countree," l. 407).

those read in the theory and practice of the new historical criticism—to see that the “Rime” was an imaginative presentation of a work comprising textual layers of the most primitive, even pre-Christian, sort. No one schooled in the new German textual criticism could fail to “see” that the opening portions of part 6 represented a textual survival of the most ancient kind of pagan lore.

Coleridge’s final (Broad Church) grasp of the “Rime” demonstrates his great theme of the One Life.²⁹ Like the Bible, the *Iliad*, and all great imaginative works possessed and transmitted by different cultures, the “Rime” is Coleridge’s imitation of a culturally redacted literary work. The special function of the poem was to illustrate a significant continuity of meaning between cultural phenomena that seemed as diverse as pagan superstitions, Catholic theology, Aristotelian science, and contemporary philological theory, to name only a few of the work’s ostentatiously present materials. The “Rime,” in its 1798 or its 1817 form, reconciles many opposite and discordant qualities.

A well-known passage from *The Table Talk* sets out the structural and thematic foundation of the “Rime” in its most general philosophic formulation:

My system, if I may venture to give it so fine a name, is the only attempt I know, ever made to reduce all knowledges into harmony. It opposes no other system, but shows what was true in each; and how that which was true in the particular, in each of them became error, *because* it was only half the truth. I have endeavoured to unite the insulated fragments of truth, and therewith to frame a perfect mirror. I show to each system that I fully understand and rightfully appreciate what that system means; but then I lift up that system to a higher point of view, from which I enable it to see its former position, where it was, indeed, but under another light and with different relations; so that the fragment of truth is not only acknowledged, but explained. Thus the old astronomers discovered and maintained much that was true; but, because they were placed on a false ground, and looked from a wrong point of view, they never did, they never could, discover the truth—that is, the whole truth. As soon as they left the earth, their false centre, and took their stand in the sun, immediately they saw the whole system in its true light, and their former station remaining, but remaining as a part of the prospect.³⁰

The “Rime” is structured around three fundamental ideologies: pagan superstition and philosophy, Catholic legend and theology, and Broad Church Protestantism. As noted, the poem’s formal layering reflects this

29. See Charles Sanders, *Coleridge and the Broad Church Movement* (Durham, N.C., 1942), and James D. Boulger, *Coleridge as Religious Thinker* (New Haven, Conn., 1961).

30. Coleridge, *The Table Talk and Omniana*, ed. T. Ashe (London, 1923), pp. 138–39.

material. The pre-Coleridgean “fragments of truth” represent “a wrong point of view” on the material of human experience. The “events” treated in the poem actually represent interpretations of events carried out in terms of certain fragmentary “systems” of human thought, and the purpose of the poem is to “lift [these systems] to a higher point of view” whence they will be open to a critical, self-conscious, but sympathetic valuation. This “higher point of view,” which *The Table Talk* passage represents as a final (divine) one, is Coleridge’s own “system” where “the whole truth” adumbrated by the (historically relative) fragments of truth is discovered. *What* that whole truth constitutes is (a) that there is a whole truth which justifies and is the ground of all the fragments of the truth; and (b) that this whole truth is in a perpetual process of becoming—indeed, that its being is *the process of its being*.

Coleridge’s system, then, is justified in the continuous and developing history of human thought. In terms of the “Rime,” Coleridge’s ideological commitment to a preconditioned ground of processive truth sanctions in its readers a diversity of interpretations based upon their particular lights. Because “the whole truth,” recognized or not, subsumes a priori all the interpretations, readers are encouraged to formulate their particular expressions of the truth. Coleridge’s much-discussed symbolic method in the poem is nothing more (or less) than his rhetorical machinery for producing such interpretive results. In Coleridge’s terms, the symbolically grounded interpretations are acts of witness rather than definitions, human events which dramatically testify to the desire to know and continuously create the truth that has always set men free.

In this context, when Haven shows the congruence between nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpretations of the “Rime,” we are able to extrapolate the significance of his research. The basic continuum of thought comprising the poem’s many interpretations testifies to the power of Coleridge’s own poetic project. Although a few critics have attempted to resist the tradition outlined by Haven—I will return to them in a moment—the vast majority follow the model set forth in Coleridge’s own comprehensive hermeneutic system established through the poem itself. The interpretive tradition licensed by the “Rime” corresponds to the network of ideological institutions (the Clerisy) which Coleridge’s ideas helped to create. Before Coleridge, the Church for centuries had been the principal ideological state apparatus, but *On the Constitution of Church and State*, among other works, marks the change which Coleridge was promoting. With him we witness the retreat of the Church and the emergence of the educational system, the academy, as Western society’s principal ideological institution. As John Colmer recently remarked, in referring to educators in today’s secular world, “We

are the clerisy."³¹ To measure the influence of Coleridge's program one need but recall the dominant ideologues in Anglo-American culture during the past one hundred and fifty years: from Coleridge, through Arnold, Emerson, Leavis, and Eliot, to Trilling, Abrams, and the contemporary apologists for English and American Romantic thought.

The complex cultural problems related to the hegemony of this tradition appear again, in miniature form, when we approach Coleridge's great literary ballad. The history of the poem's criticism reveals, for example, that readers have not found it easy to escape the power of Coleridge's hermeneutics. From Babbitt to Empson and Pirie, a few critics have struggled against the dominant tradition of readers. Their characteristic method is to attack either the Romantic-symbolical readings—ridiculed by Empson and Pirie, for example—or Coleridge himself and the entire project ("spilt religion") which generated such readings. Sometimes, as in Empson's case, a distinction is drawn between the "early," "secular" Coleridge—author of the 1798 "Rime"—and the late, Christian dodderer—author of the 1817 revisionist piece. This antithetical tradition is important chiefly because it corroborates, from a hostile position, the basic ideological uniformity which underlies the dominant symbolic tradition initiated by Coleridge.

The problem with such antithetical readings is that they are at war with the differentials they themselves emphasize and corroborate. Babbitt and Empson are married, by antithesis and anxiety, to the positions they are attacking. The rules for such relationships, which have been laid down in the theoretical works initiated by *The Anxiety of Influence*, produce what can well be called "the fate of reading." What this means—I merely state the basic problem in another form—is that a historical process begins to appear as a fatal one; specifically, the act of literary criticism comes to seem so repetitional that drastic evasive measures begin to be taken. Babbitt's and Empson's violence succeeds to the play of differences in post-structuralism because acts which make a difference, in the mind as well as in the world, begin to seem difficult if not impossible to achieve. When traditional human activities seem as unimportant as academic criticism has grown to seem in this period of our culture—when it appears to make no difference what, if any, literary criticism you read or write—movements begin (deconstructionism in this period, aestheticism and naturalism at the end of the nineteenth century) which throw into relief the crisis line of an ideological tradition.

In terms of the critical history of the "Rime," antithetical critics like Babbitt and Empson seem to violate the past of its treasures, while the traditional line seems to have exhausted its future and left us with noth-

31. John Colmer, *Coleridge: Critic of Society* (Oxford, 1959), p. 32.

ing to follow. At such moments a historical analysis becomes a cultural imperative, for it is through such an analysis that we can recover what the past has sent to us and redefine the future of our own work. Such a method demands that differences be sharpened and clarified historically. The resources made available through the "Rime" and its critical history will not be recovered until we begin to specify clearly the ideological gulf which separates us from them both. A poem like the "Rime" dramatizes a salvation story, but it is not the old story of our salvation *in* Christ; rather, it is the new story of our salvation *of* Christ. Coleridge would have us believe that the latter story is the latest expression of the former and hence that the former retains its cultural truth. To the critical view of a contemporary materialist and historical consciousness, however, the "Rime" 's advanced Christian machinery represents a view of the world only qualitatively less alien to ourselves than the ideology which supports the *Iliad* or the writings of Confucius. These works, we must come to see, transcend their particular cultural circumstances not because they contain unchanging human truths but rather because their *particular* truthfulness has been so thoroughly—so materially—specified.

Like the *Iliad* or *Paradise Lost* or any great historical product, the "Rime" is a work of transhistorical rather than so-called universal significance. This verbal distinction is important because it calls attention to a real one. Like *The Divine Comedy* or any other poem, the "Rime" is not valued or used always or everywhere or by everyone in the same way or for the same reasons. Poetical and artistic works have chequered critical histories which testify to their discontinuous power and employment. The study of a work's critical history is imperative precisely for that reason: the analysis reveals to us, in yet another form, the special historical life which a work has been living in the dialectic of its processive career. Historical analysis uncovers, therefore, a paradox of thought which yet contains a fundamental human truth: that the universal or transhistorical significance of any ideological product is a function of the specific limits of place and circumstance which are inscribed, and therefore "immortalized," in those works we call poems which are created and re-created over time. The importance of great art is that it has always made a difference.

Anyone who has taught ancient or culturally removed literature has experienced the difficulty of transmitting historically alienated material. Nor does it help much to assume or pretend that what Bacon says in "Of Education," what Sophocles dramatizes in the *Oedipus*, or what the Jahwist has presented in his Genesis can be appreciated or even understood by an uneducated student or reader. Of course, the problem can be solved if the teacher avoids it altogether and asks the student to deal with the work in its present context only, that is, to supply it with a "reading." Alien works may be, as we say, "interpreted." But we must understand that such exercises, carried out in relative historical igno-

rance, are not *critical* operations. Rather, they are vehicles for recapitulating and objectifying the reader's particular ideological commitments.³² To "read" in this way is to confront Ahab's doubloon, to read self-reflexively. The danger in such a method is that it will not be able to provide the reader with a social differential that can illuminate the limits of that immediate interpretation. The importance of ancient or culturally removed works lies precisely in this fact: that they themselves, as culturally alienated products, confront present readers with ideological differentials that help to define the limits and special functions of those current ideological practises. Great works continue to have something to say because what they have to say is so peculiarly and specifically their own that we, who are different, can learn from them.

Though the "Rime" is not nearly so removed from the present as the *Oedipus*, we must not allow its alienation to escape us. The force of a line like "It is an ancient mariner" comes from one's sense that an ancient minstrel did *not* write it but that Coleridge did. This is an awareness which was, and was meant to be, available to audiences from the poem's first appearance. But with the passage of time other perspectives become both possible and necessary. We see, for example, that the minstrel represented to us here is *not* the figure known to Child or Gummere but the one specifically available to a reader and admirer of Percy. To see this fact, even in so small an event as that line, is to be able to read the line *in* its own terms but without being made *subject* to those terms. We willingly suspend our disbelief only when disbelief, or critical distance, is the ground of our response. Such critical skepticism (it is not an attitude but a method) is especially important for a work like the "Rime," since the poem itself seeks to break down a sense of ultimate discontinuity through the structure of its artistic illusions. Criticism must penetrate those illusions and specify what is involved in the particular uses to which they have been put. The meaning of the "Rime" emerges through the study of the history of its illusions.

5. The "Rime" and the Meaning of Symbol

In his introduction to the *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky defends himself against the charge that he is a biased reporter by attacking the concept of "objective history." No historian's presentation can ever be free of tendentious and ideological elements, Trotsky argues. His position is not, however, subjectively relativistic. On the contrary,

32. This result lies in the nature of hermeneutics itself, at least as presently understood. See, for example, Heinrich Ott's "Hermeneutics and Personhood," where he states the basic principle of this interpretive method: "In my first knowledge of the subject matter I already know implicitly all that which I later learned in addition" (from *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning*, ed. S. R. Hopper and D. L. Miller [New York, 1967], p. 17).

one judges the adequacy of a historian's work by its value as an explanation of the phenomena, by its congruence and comprehensiveness in relation to the objective circumstances. But the explanation must be constructed, Trotsky says, from an ideological vantage of some sort, and in his own case Trotsky argues that he is both more objectively correct in his vantage and analysis and more subjectively honest and clear about his methods. Trotsky, that is to say, makes every effort not to disguise his ideological position behind a specious appeal to objectivity but instead builds and objectifies his bias into the very structure of the analysis and keeps the reader aware of it at all times. Trotsky does this because, in his view, the ideology is a crucial part of the analysis, as much a part of his historical subject as it is the basis of his historical method.

Trotsky's ideology corresponds to what Coleridge called "first principles," except that the former is a structure of scientific thought and the latter a theological, or what Coleridge termed a metaphysical, system. The general argument in *The Statesman's Manual*—that the Bible is the most reliable guide for secular statecraft—is based upon a view wholly analogous to Trotsky's: that history, whether lived or narrated, is not a sequence of atomized moments or facts but a structured phenomenon, the praxis of a living and related set of commitments. For Coleridge, the crucial importance of a work like the Bible lies in its continuous historical existence. Because it must be read through the mediation of its transmitters, that is, through the Church, readers cannot receive its words except through acts of faith or, as we should say, through tendentious interpretations, acts of conscious commitment to the received materials. The Bible comes to us bearing with it the history of its criticism; it is a writing which also contains its own readings and which generates the cumulative history of its own further retransmissions and reinterpretations.

As already seen, Coleridge's views on the Bible were merely paradigmatic of his views on all literary texts. A committed Christian, he necessarily saw the Bible as the world's central literary event; but, like his contemporaries, he understood very well that other non-Christian cultures had their equivalent of the Western Bible. Indeed, as Coleridge argued in "The Destiny of Nations," the West's central pre-Christian documents, for example, the saga literature of the skaldic bards, were important scriptural events not merely in themselves but in relation to the general development of mankind's religious cultures. German biblical critics were revealing the non- and pre-Judaic strands in the Scriptures, and the new philologists of primitive and classical texts were at work on similar projects.

The "Rime," as readers have known all along, is an imitation or literary ballad modeled on works like those contained in Percy's *Reliques* or on translations of Gottfried Bürger's imitation ballads. What has not been so clear is Coleridge's ideological motive in producing the "Rime."

The context of his religious and critical thought shows quite clearly, I believe, that the poem is, as it were, an English national Scripture; that is to say, the poem imitates a redacted literary text which comprises various material extending from early pre-Christian periods through a succession of later epochs of Christian culture, and the ultimate locus of these transmissions is England. We must also understand, however, that for Coleridge each redaction specifies and calls attention to the series of distinct epochal (that is, ideological) interpretations through which the poetic material has been evolving.

By re-presenting not merely a text but an evidently *mediated* text, Coleridge provided both a spur and a model for later readers, who have been encouraged to elucidate for themselves and their own special needs the meaning and significance of the poem's symbolic statements. Ultimately, however, although Coleridge's project aimed to generate an unlimited number of readings, it was equally committed, by its own hermeneutic ideology, to a certain sort of reading. These are the interpretations which Haven has synthesized for us. Coleridge's theory of symbolism is a Western and a Judeo-Christian theory, and the hermeneutics of the "Rime" has always been governed by this general frame of reference and set of, what Coleridge called, "facts":

Christianity is especially differenced from all other religions by being *grounded on facts* which all men alike have the means of ascertaining, the same means, with equal facility, and which no man can ascertain for another. Each person must be herein querist and respondent to himself; Am I sick, and therefore need a physician?—Am I in spiritual slavery, and therefore need a ransom?—Have I given a pledge, which must be redeemed, and which I cannot redeem by my own resources?³³

Such facts are, of course, what we call ideology. The important thing to see, however, is that Coleridge knew perfectly well that these facts were "interpreted facts," faith-determined and faith-constitutive. To read the "Rime" in such a "redemptive" frame is, as Coleridge maintained (and as we must agree), to reduplicate its determinative, a priori ideology. In this way does the "Rime" assume into itself its own critical tradition.

Through works like the "Rime" Coleridge successfully sustained his theistic and Christian views about nature and human history in the institutions of Western education. Hence the literary criticism of the "Rime" has never been, in the proper sense, *critical* of the poem but has merely recapitulated, in new and various ways, and not always very consciously, what Coleridge himself had polemically maintained. To a *critical* view, however, what Coleridge re-presents in the "Rime" is a historically and culturally limited set of ideas. Readers have not always found it easy to

33. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, p. 55.

see this fact when they interpret the poem's "symbols" because they characteristically regard their interpretations as something which *they bring to* the preexistent "text." The "Rime" is one thing, and its interpretations are something else, separated by time, place, and person. But Coleridge's own poem, as well as his involvement in the German critical tradition, ought to remind us that an act of interpretation may be assumed a priori in the materials to be interpreted. In the case of a poem like the "Rime," hermeneutics is criticism's grand illusion.

A properly critical view of the "Rime" can only begin with the recognition that what needs criticism and interpretation is not simply the work's set of symbolic paraphernalia (albatross, mariner, spectre-bark, water snakes, rain, sun, moon, etc.); these are "in" the poem and therefore the objects of our analysis, but they are only in the poem *as symbols*. That is to say, they enter the reader's horizon as objects-bearing-meaning, as already significant (or preinterpreted) phenomena. A critical analysis of the poem's poetic materials, therefore, cannot be carried out by erecting a thematic elucidation of albatross, sun, moon, water, and so on but only by erecting an analysis of the *meaningful* albatross, the *significant* sun, moon, stars, water. The materials dealt with by the "Rime" are not—indeed, never were—mere "secular" or "natural" facts; they are pre-designed and preinterpreted phenomena. We may, indeed must, read the poem's symbols, but what we must critically elucidate are the meanings of the symbols. Readers of the "Rime" generate its meanings; critics set out and explain the meaning of its meanings.

The albatross, for example, is an interpreted phenomenon *ab initio*: the bird is part of the mariner's superstitious preconceptions. So too the mariner himself: by virtue of his association with the Wandering Jew, for example, he has been incorporated by the poem into a special structure of signification. In each case the reader is reading meaning not of the bird or mariner in isolation but of bird and mariner as they represent or locate certain superstitious (and, ultimately, religious) forms of thought. Similarly, the terms "Bridegroom" and "Wedding-Guest" are delivered to and through the Western, nineteenth- and twentieth-century reader in terms of their Christian frame of reference. These are not words from an innocent, "natural" language, as it were, but from a particular symbolic and religious context of discourse.

In general, what Coleridge does in his poem is present us, via an imitation ballad, with a wide variety of culturally and historically mediated material; and he arranges this material, formally, according to philological rules which governed the constitution and transmission of ancient texts and which were just then being formulated in the circles of the Higher Critics. This formal procedure empowers Coleridge to produce a wide variety of poetic effects. It enables him, for example, to achieve the wit of lines like "We were the first that ever burst / Into that

silent sea" (ll. 105–6), where the contemporary reader encounters an "explanation" for how the Pacific Ocean (*Mare Pacificum*) may originally have received its name (see also l. 110). More significantly, the Higher Critical model gave Coleridge a structure in which various materials apparently alien to each other could be reconciled and harmonized. Different sorts of superstitious phenomena are held in a significant relation with various Christian ideologies. We are enabled to "interpret," for example, the originally pagan Polar Spirit in terms of a redemptive Christian scheme because the philological model tells us that the two are historically related via the operation of processes of textual transmission and interpolation. One important function of Coleridge's Polar Spirit, therefore, is to remind us that such superstitious phenomena retain their power of signification in history even after their ideology has ceased to play a dominant role in the institutions of a culture; that they retain this power by virtue of their incorporation by later ideological systems; and, finally, that they are available to such incorporation precisely because they are, originally, *interpreted* rather than merely natural phenomena.

Creating this sort of poem required Coleridge to imitate a transmitted ballad. He had to establish a text which displayed several textual "layers," as we have already seen, and the poem's lexicon is the ultimate carrier of this set of textual layers. The "Rime" cannot work if it does not contain words which the reader will associate with diverse historical periods. Attention has always been drawn to the archaic diction of the ballad, but equally important is the modern diction. "Bassoon" and "lighthouse" are seventeenth-century words, and their appearance in the text indicates (fictively, of course) "late interpolated passages." In general, the archaic diction is only significant in its relation to the more modern dictions; the poetic system that holds them together is using both as the formal foundation for its work of symbology.

Coleridge takes it for granted that an "Enlightened" mind of his or a later period will not believe that the spectre-bark ever had a concrete and objective existence or that the creatures called Death and Life-in-Death ever did what the poem reports or ever existed in the ordinary sense. The Enlightened mind will recognize such phenomena to be mental projections of the mariner's delirium; indeed, he will see all the fabulous events in this way, that is, as phenomena mediated either by the mariner, or by the balladeer(s), or by some still later editor or scribe, like the writer of the gloss. All of these are pre-Enlightenment minds. But to Coleridge's (post- and anti-Enlightenment) mind, this Enlightened view is itself a limited one. The Enlightenment (Higher Critical) attitude sees (a) that all phenomena are mind mediated and (b) that these mediations are culturally and historically determined. What it does not see, in Coleridge's view, is that the entire system (or history) of the

mediations is organized a priori and that the history of the mediations is an evolving process whereby the original (God-instituted and redemptive) system is raised up into human consciousness by the processive acts of human consciousness itself.

This Coleridgean view of the poem is what has licensed its traditions of symbolic interpretation. But this view must itself finally be laid aside as a determinative one. Coleridge's appeal to historical process and his insistence that symbolic interpretation (the meaning of symbols) is a function of specific cultural and historical factors ultimately overtake his own poetic ideology. For his is a sacramental and Christian view of symbols in which history itself is revealed as a sacramental Christian symbol. The "Rime" imitates or re-presents a process of textual evolution, and the symbolic meaning of that process—which is the poem's dominant symbolic event—is that the process *has* a symbolic value and meaning, that is, a religious, a Christian, and ultimately a redemptive meaning. In this we can see very clearly the living operation of processive historical events. At the outset of the nineteenth century and in reaction to the revolutionary intellectual developments of the Enlightenment, Christian ideas find a new birth of freedom, not in the *fact* of Christ's resurrection, which is the traditional Pauline view, but in the symbol of the resurrection, in its *meaning*.

6. *Pre-Raphaelite Symbolism: A Critical Differential*

We can specify the peculiar (historically determined) character of Coleridge's form of symbolism if we juxtapose it briefly with some alternative symbolic modes. The limits of the Coleridgean view would be quite apparent if we were to compare it with, for example, Mallarmé's or Rimbaud's *symboliste* programs, which represent a very different set of cultural determinants and limitations. But this cross-cultural comparison will not illuminate Coleridge's position nearly so well as a comparison drawn from within the English poetic tradition. I have in mind here the programmatic symbolism developed through the Pre-Raphaelite movement, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in particular.

M. H. Abrams has rightly said of High English Romanticism that it sought to reformulate and save the "traditional concepts, schemes, and values" of the Christian heritage. Abrams believes, wrongly I think, that this was the program of all forms of Romanticism; however that may be, his thesis is perfectly exemplified in Coleridge's work.

The Ancient Mariner is neither an allegorical fable nor a symbolist poem. The persistent religious and moral allusions, however, both in the text and in the glosses . . . , invite us to take the Mariner's experience as an instance of the Christian plot of moral error, the

discipline of suffering, and a consequent change of heart. The Mariner's literal journey, then, is also a spiritual journey. . . .³⁴

The commentary is right on the mark, though one would wish to add that Coleridge's glosses were a brilliant addition to his poem because they emphasized a slight sense of historical discontinuity. Abrams is correct to say the poem is neither *symboliste* nor allegorical because this discontinuity exists. The "Rime" presents us with an obviously "Christian" plot, but it insists that we "read" the plot in a highly personal and unorthodox way. Though its meaning is not so extensive or open as the meaning of a *symboliste* poem, the "Rime" relaxes the allegorical urgency of its materials just enough to permit "personal" interpretations that will yet not violate the poem's essentially Christian structure of concepts and values.

As we know, the Pre-Raphaelites and their circle were devoted to the literary ballad, which in fact achieved the rank of an important genre in the hands of the Romantics. The "Rime" is the best early representation of this highly Romantic form. But with the Pre-Raphaelites, verisimilitude of historical detail, both substantive and formal, became so central an issue that England produced, in the person of Swinburne, her greatest master of the literary ballad. Paradoxically, or so it might seem, this demand for a literalness of imagination resulted in poems which did not draw close continuities with the spirit of the past and its traditional forms of order, but which rather heightened one's feeling of the separation between past and present. The medieval worlds evoked by Morris and Rossetti and Swinburne were interesting precisely because that famous Pre-Raphaelite detail distanced their material, made it appear remote and strange. The reader of "The Blessed Damozel" is placed in a forest of symbolic detail so dense that correspondences become unmanageable. Yet the situation is neither symbolic (in the Coleridgean mode) nor *symboliste*. Pre-Raphaelite detail does not put the reader on the threshold of a fresh openness, of extensive new sets of possible relations, but shocks him with the realization that his traditional Romantic accommodations with past symbolic orders do not serve the actual truths of those orders, which are in fact much more mysterious than had been realized. The "Rime" draws continuities with the past; Pre-Raphaelite ballads enforce separations.

The relevance of these observations for Coleridge's use of a Christian symbolic mode will become clearer if we extend this analysis into a few more Pre-Raphaelite commonplaces. Pre-Raphaelite art and literature reproduce Christian iconography in great quantity, but anyone familiar with this pivotal movement knows that, despite its religious

34. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 272. The following section of this essay (pp. 61-63) is a revised portion of a review essay, "Romanticism and the Embarrassments of Critical Tradition," which appeared in *Modern Philology* 70 (February 1973).

substance and even the religious convictions of at least some of its practitioners, Pre-Raphaelitism is not a religious art. The inheritors of Pre-Raphaelitism—the Vienna Sezession and Art Nouveau—are the logical extensions of a Pre-Raphaelite attitude; and though a true religious mood is discernible in these later movements, it is a religious mentality doing conscious battle with forms of Romantic orthodoxy, as the work of Gustav Moreau and Stefan George makes very plain.

Pre-Raphaelitism, on the other hand, represents a return to certain basic Romantic principles. It is a movement which did not want so much to elaborate a revision upon traditional Romantic forms—which is what Tennyson ended up doing—as to return Romantic perception to its *raison d'être*. The Pre-Raphaelite insistence upon careful realistic detail, so apparently un-Romantic, is in fact one of the two essential features of its Romanticism. The other is the inclination to deal with very traditional subjects, and in particular with Christian subjects. These two qualities, operating together, opened another revisionist phase wherein Pre-Raphaelite art at last discovered a usable aesthetic medium for the viewpoint of a wholly secularized, and therefore non-Coleridgean, form of the Higher Criticism.

But the whole matter is best discussed in an example. Rossetti fixed the following sonnet to his painting “The Girlhood of Mary Virgin”:

These are the symbols. On that cloth of red
 I' the centre is the Tripoint: perfect each,
 Except the second of its points, to teach
 That Christ is not yet born. The books—whose head
 Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said—
 Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
 Therefore on them the lily standeth, which
 Is Innocence, being interpreted.
 The seven-thorn'd briar and the palm seven-leaved
 Are her great sorrow and her great reward.
 Until the end be full, the Holy One
 Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
 Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
 Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son.

In an older context, this sonnet might not seem so strange. Its force here comes from the fact that, though the interpretation he gives to the details of the painting is quite traditionally grounded, it is an interpretation without any essential religious import precisely because it is so literal. The details of poem and painting are precise enough, and their Christian context is sufficiently complete to allow an allegorical action; yet the poem forbids a religious response. For if Rossetti's allegorical pattern is exact, it is also consciously recovered, and thus presents itself to us not as a religious insight but as an antiquarian discovery. The result is that

all the details in the painting and the poem, though "interpreted," have an even greater phenomenological innocence than they would have had in a medieval context. One is suddenly faced with a world (Christianity) which one thought one knew but whose spirit is in fact now seen to be profoundly remote.

Unlike the "Rime," this poem is no vehicle back to essential religious significance of the Christian myth. Rather, it transports us back further still, to the essentially secular, or aesthetic, significance of that myth. The poem shows us that Christian iconology can have a significance, its beauty, which is even more radical than the most profound allegorical interpretation. It also tells us that allegorical interpretation can retain its own importance even after the withdrawal of the sea of faith, for such interpretations still possess the beauty of their design. The very details of Rossetti's "Christian" interpretation acquire a physique comparable to the details of the painting. Rossetti forces the interpretation to stand apart from us, forces us to view it as an object of delighted curiosity. What ought to be a definitive interpretation of the picture is discovered to be not an intellectual but a purely sensational, or perhaps anthropological, experience.

When Pre-Raphaelites return to an extremely detailed reproduction of traditional forms, it is always to work for effects like this. Indeed, when Rossetti writes upon some work of a painter from an earlier culture—one of his numerous sonnets for pictures—he not only repeats the technique of "The Girlhood of Mary Virgin" and its pendant sonnet; he tends to make his purposes even more explicit. His sonnet "An Allegorical Dance of Women," for example, is written on Mantegna's "Parnassus," in the Louvre, which seems to represent the triumph of Venus over Mars. But Rossetti opens his sonnet with the observation: "Scarcely, I think; yet it indeed *may* be / The meaning [of his own work] reached him." Rossetti is doubtful that Mantegna knew the full meaning of his own picture because Rossetti knows that, while meaning and allegorical constructs multiply, the essential character of art and life alike is their ability to generate human creations which are forever escaping the ideologies which made them possible. Of the Mantegna "Parnassus," then, he concludes:

Its meaning filleth it,
 A secret of the wells of Life: to wit:—
 The heart's each pulse shall keep the sense it had
 With all, though the mind's labour run to nought.

That is, though the cultural gap between Mantegna and Rossetti is complete—a situation which is distinctly *not* the case with the historically diverse materials re-presented through Coleridge's "Rime"—Rossetti is yet able to join hands with Mantegna across the gulf of their differences.

What the two share, according to Rossetti, is not a mutual commitment, symbolically maintained, to a religious ideology but a common devotion to the practice of art. In this case symbolism is material and technological rather than conceptual. The atheist Rossetti keeps company with the Catholic Mantegna, and with Christian traditions generally, by seeing hermeneutics not as a process of interpretation but as a history of changing style. In the Pre-Raphaelite movement appears, for the first time unmistakably, the polemical deposition: no ideas but in things.

7. Conclusion

What, then, is the meaning of the "Rime"? Coleridge tried to guide his early readers to an answer in his famous *Biographia Literaria* pronouncement on the poem and the entire *Lyrical Ballads* project:

In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. [Chap. 14]

If we examine this passage carefully—assisted, perhaps, by our knowledge of its critical history—we will see that the famous dictum about the "willing suspension of disbelief" is being used in two senses. In the first instance the phrase refers to Coleridge's use of legendary, "supernatural," "romantic" materials, that is, to what is "contained" in the "Rime" when we see it as an ancient tale or, as we might now say, as a "myth." This sort of material is recognized to be a "delusion" by Coleridge, and his work shows that similar delusions can be found at the level of the ballad narrative as well as at the level of the gloss. The spectre-bark, Life-in-Death, the Polar Spirit, and the "grace of the Holy Mother" are not, to use Coleridge's term, "real" except under the deluded eye of the beholders of such phenomena. The art of the "Rime" persuades us to suspend our disbelief in such matters; indeed, when Coleridge speaks of a "*willing* suspension of disbelief," we understand that he is presuming in his readers a shared consciousness of the superstitious character of his primitive (mainly pagan and Roman Catholic) materials.

But Coleridge intimates a more comprehensive understanding of the willing suspension of disbelief when he says that it "constitutes poetic faith." From this vantage the statement can be seen, and of course has been seen, as a locus classicus for the Romantic ideology of the creative imagination. "To transfer from our inward nature a human interest and

semblance of truth" to the "Rime" 's superstitious materials is to psychologize reality and to suggest that the "true" reality of all external phenomena, whether "real" or "delusion," is inward and subjective. In this case, the willing suspension of disbelief does not apply to a poetic tour de force but to an imaginative construct which offers limitless opportunities for symbolic interpretation. In the first case the reader is willing to suspend his disbelief—which he nonetheless remains conscious of and attached to—whereas in the second he is willing to gain a poetic faith. When the latter occurs the "Rime" enters upon its symbolic history and becomes the object of Romantic hermeneutics.

From our present vantage, what we must do is inaugurate our disbelief in Coleridge's "poetic faith." This Romantic ideology must be seen for what it is, a historical phenomenon of European culture, generated to save the "traditional concepts, schemes, and values" of the Christian heritage. To interpret the "Rime" at all, without a prior historical analytic, is necessarily to reify the Romantic concept of the creative imagination. But that concept must become for us the same sort of "superstition" and "delusion" which "the grace of the Holy Mother" was to Coleridge. Only then will the poem become available once again to a (new) tradition of interpreters. Indeed, only then will Coleridge's own "poetic faith" become possible, for such a faith depends upon the hypothetical suspension of a prior, and presumed, disbelief.

To inaugurate such a disbelief in the "Rime" 's ideology of symbolism, we must historicize every aspect of the work. This is a procedure which the poem's own method has initiated. The mariner interprets his experiences by his own lights, and each subsequent mediator—the ballad transmitters, the author of the gloss, and Coleridge himself—all represent their specific cultural views. In such a situation we must read the poem with the fullest possible consciousness of its poetically organized "historical layerings." The spectre-bark is seen as such by the mariner and is accepted *literatim* by the fictive textual transmitters. But if the poem assumes these superstitious attitudes into itself, it also presumes the presence of Enlightened readers. The latter will of course recognize the ship to be a hallucination, perhaps with no basis in physical reality at all, perhaps an imagined structure created by the mariner's fevered brain out of some whisps of sea fog. Because Coleridge has an Enlightened mind as well, he knows that "In a distempered dream things & forms in themselves harmless inflict a terror of anguish."³⁵ But his mind is also Christian and symbolist, so even as he asks us, in the "Rime," to disbelieve in the phenomenal reality of the spectre-bark, he also asks us to suspend that disbelief:

35. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, 1: no. 205 (the entry is dated 1796–97).

The excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.

What may be seen as a “delusion” in one point of view may be usefully regarded as a spiritual truth in another. Meaning replaces event, and word replaces fact as the real gives way to the symbolic.

When Newman watched Coleridge replace the Truth with the Imagination of the Truth, he concluded that Coleridge had “indulged a liberty of speculation which no Christian can tolerate, and advanced conclusions which were often heathen rather than Christian.”³⁶ Newman’s analysis, like his orthodox fears, were both correct and farsighted, for Coleridge’s own method would necessarily place his interpretive scheme beneath the critical razor he first employed. Interpretation of the spectre-bark is analogous to the interpretation of every facet of the poem, including its general theme and structure: interpretation, including the author’s interpretation, falls subject to those historical limitations which critical analysis can explicate. The fictive writer of the gloss gives a long and beautiful commentary on the stars of line 266. The best gloss on such a gloss is a passage like the following from *The Statesman’s Manual*:

The great PRINCIPLES of our religion, the sublime IDEAS spoken out everywhere in the Old and New Testament, resemble the fixed stars, which appear of the same size to the naked as to the armed eye; the magnitude of which the telescope may rather seem to diminish than to increase. At the annunciation of *principles*, of *ideas*, the soul of man awakes, and starts up, as an exile in a far distant land at the unexpected sounds of his native language, when after long years of absence, and almost of oblivion, he is suddenly addressed in his own mother-tongue. He weeps for joy, and embraces the speaker as his brother.³⁷

This is not the meaning of the poem’s text, but it is the meaning which perhaps best clarifies what kind of poem we are dealing with. Coleridge might associate the meaning of this passage with his text, but it is a special reading, peculiar to Coleridge. In such matters, as Coleridge had said, “Each person must be . . . querist and respondent to himself.”³⁸

A poem like the “Rime” encourages, therefore, the most diverse readings and interpretations. Since this encouragement is made in terms

36. Newman, “The Prospects of the Anglican Church,” *Essays Critical and Historical* (London, 1897), p. 268.

37. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, p. 24.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

of the Christian economy, the interpretations have generally remained within the broad spiritualist terms—"heathen" terms, in Newman's view—which Coleridge's mind had allowed for. The historical method of the "Rime," however, had also prepared the ground for a thoroughly revisionist view of the poem, in which the entire ideological structure of its symbolist procedures would finally be able to be seen in their special historical terms. When this happens the meaning of the "Rime" emerges as the "dramatic truth" of Coleridge's intellectual and religious commitments. In the event the poem suffers no loss of power or significance; on the contrary, at that point we begin to see quite clearly the true extent of its power and the immense significance it has had, just as we also begin to see how these things came to pass. When the entire poetical work—including, perhaps especially, its verbal forms and its symbolic procedures—is scrutinized through the lens of a critical rather than a hermeneutic method, the "Rime" will once again begin to discover its future. It will cease to be an object of faith—whether Romantic or Christian—and become, instead, a human—a social and a historical—resource.