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## **The Coleridge Bulletin**

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge  
New Series 28 (NS) Winter 2006

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<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

# I Shot the Albatross

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SINCE Robert Penn Warren's interpretation in 1946 of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as the Romantic expression of a sacramental narrative, held together by the imaginative vision of Coleridge's "One Life" philosophy,<sup>1</sup> readers have employed various critical methodologies to undermine a Christian reading of the poem. Despite the fact that the work of critically analyzing, psychoanalyzing, deconstructing, and historicizing the poem has revealed inconsistencies, lacunae, contradictions, and absurdities at every point in the narrative, critics seem compelled, like the possessed Mariner himself, to return to repeat the tale of this strange poem. Interestingly, the basic problems of establishing a unified Christian narrative were indicated by John Livingston Lowes in *The Road to Xanadu*, who claims that while the poem has an inner consistency within "that magic circle of the poem itself," the poem does not conform to reality. Lowes claims:

The relentless line of cause and consequence runs likewise, unswerving as the voyage, through the poem. But consequence and cause, *in terms of the world of reality*, are ridiculously incommensurable. The shooting of the sea-bird carries in its train the vengeance of an aquatic daemon, acting in conjunction with a spectre-bark; and an impulse of love for other living creatures of the deep summons a troop of angels to navigate an unmanned ship. Moreover, because the Mariner has shot a bird, four times fifty sailors drop down dead, and the slayer himself is doomed to an endless life. The punishment, measured out by the standards of a world of balanced penalties, palpably does not fit the crime. But the sphere of balanced penalties is not the given world in which the poem moves. Within that world... we accept the poem's premises."<sup>2</sup>

Modern criticism agrees with this summation. Readers have been troubled by the seemingly arbitrary nature of the act of killing the albatross, the gratuitously grotesque and prolonged punishment meted out to the Mariner, as well as the death-dealing blow given to the two-hundred shipmates of the Mariner, who have done nothing to deserve it. Coupled with this is the oversimplified moral statement which seemingly summarizes the poem at the end, and we have the general argument against Warren's sacramental reading:<sup>3</sup> the poem presents a dark universe projected by Coleridge's debilitated psyche, in a conscious or unconscious manoeuvre which undermines the attempt to present a

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Penn Warren, "A Poem of Pure Imagination" *Kenyon Review* 8 (1946): 391-427.

<sup>2</sup> John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1927): 275.

<sup>3</sup> See Edward E. Bostetter, "The Nightmare World of *The Ancient Mariner*" *Studies in Romanticism* 1 (1962): 241-54; Homer Obed Brown, "The Art of Theology and the Theology of Art: Robert Penn Warren's Reading of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" *boundary 2* 8 (1979): 237-60; David S. Miall, "Guilt and Death: The Predicament of *The Ancient Mariner*" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 24 (1984): 633-53; Richard Matlak, *The Poetry of Relationship: The Wordsworths and Coleridge, 1797-1800* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997): 96-7.

benevolent Christian narrative of sin and redemption.

My purpose in this paper is to challenge this dominant reading, by placing the 1798 version of the poem published in *Lyrical Ballads* in its historical context. Perhaps William Empson's finest argument against Warren's position was that when the poem was being written, Coleridge was only beginning to emerge from his Unitarian beliefs, and the full acceptance of Trinitarian Christianity remained a decade away.<sup>4</sup> One might add that the philosophy of "the One Life with us and abroad," which grounds Warren's reading of *The Rime*, is not articulated in the 1796 poem entitled "Effusion XXXV," but was added to the 1817 version in *Sibylline Leaves* entitled "The Eolian Harp." But curiously, while all critics recognize that the poem has something to do with the Christian idea of sin, few have attempted to locate the poem in the context of Coleridge's shifting religious and political views at the time of composition.<sup>5</sup> What I want to suggest is that *The Rime* does in fact represent the Christian dynamic of sin and redemption, articulating the rejection of the philosophical and historical determinism of his earlier Unitarian beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

A number of critics have noted in their discussions of *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, Coleridge's letter to his brother George, written at the same time as the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, announcing that he has come to accept the orthodox Christian view of original sin. The passage is familiar, but should be recounted here: "Of GUILT I say nothing; but I believe most stedfastly in original Sin; that from our mothers' wombs our understandings are darkened; and even where our understandings are in the Light, that our organization is depraved, and our volitions imperfect... And for this inherent depravity, I believe, that the Spirit of the Gospel is the sole cure..." (CL I 396) However, no rigorous attempt has been made to explain the manner in which the narrative of the poem conforms to the doctrine of original sin. Rather, critics have focused on the retributive aspects of the poem, rather than considering the doctrine of original sin in the tradition of Christian thought, which formulates the origin of evil as a mystery: the mystery of the origin of sin. In his early published writings, following Hartley's Necessitarian understanding of evil, Coleridge denied the doctrine of original sin. Consistent

<sup>4</sup> See William Empson, "The Ancient Mariner" *Critical Quarterly* 6 (1964): 298-319.

<sup>5</sup> One exception is Peter Kitson, who has admirably argued that the poem marks a move away from a commitment to the principles of the French Revolution, while at the same departing from his earlier philosophy of Optimism. See Kitson, "Coleridge, the French Revolution, and 'The Ancient Mariner': Collective Guilt and Individual Salvation" *Yearbook of English Studies* 19 (1989): 197-207. My argument here expands on Kitson's further claim that this move highlights for Coleridge the need for individual forgiveness, and that political reform is mediated by giving and receiving true mercy (199). For an account which argues that the Mariner's blessing can be seen as mediating political tensions, see Michael Murphy, "John Thelwall, Coleridge and 'The Ancient Mariner'" *Romanticism* 8 (2002): 62-74.

<sup>6</sup> For a reading which claims that *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* expresses Coleridge's commitment to Unitarian theology, see William A. Ulmer, "Necessary Evils: Unitarian Theodicy in 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'" *Studies in Romanticism* 43 (2004): 327-56. See also Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: OUP, 1999): 282-3, where he suggests that the various difficulties of the poem derive from problems associated with Unitarian theology. My argument in this paper is that the poem is incompatible with the Unitarian theological position which denies original sin and individual responsibility for sin, and marks the beginnings of Coleridge's move towards orthodox Christianity.

with this, Coleridge rejected the idea of explaining suffering as a form of atonement, calling it a “Blasphemy” inconsistent with the love and mercy of God.<sup>7</sup> However, he did suggest that there is such a category as moral evil, arguing in a 10 March 1795 letter to Dyer: “Almost all the physical Evil in the World depends on the existence of moral Evil.”<sup>8</sup> In 1795, Coleridge seems to assign evil to moral agency, while denying that it is caused by the human will. In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge had denounced the retributive way of understanding the doctrine of original sin, while affirming the doctrine, stating that the idea of “hereditary sin, guilt inherited” is a “monstrous fiction,” a perversion of “the mystery of Original Sin.”<sup>9</sup> The shift in Coleridge’s thinking on original sin from 1795 to 1825 moves from an explanation that attempts to deny the mystery of sin and its origins, and so, fails to account for the responsibility of sin in human beings, to one which affirms that mystery. It is a mistake then, to consider Coleridge as holding to an understanding of suffering which is retributive, as most critics of *The Rime* seem to hold. The interpretive key to the *Rime* is one of understanding how the doctrine of original sin is presented without violating the sense of its mystery, while preserving the responsibility of the agent who commits sin. I want to turn now to an interpretive account of this difficulty.

In two neglected articles published in the 1960’s, John A. Stuart argued that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is informed by the writings of St. Augustine.<sup>10</sup> His argument is summarized in this way: “Belief in original sin, as interpreted by Coleridge, is ‘the moral sentiment’ that not only informs the poem with its religious dynamic but gives it its ‘principle or cause of action.’ The action of The Ancient Mariner runs “parallel, in certain respects, to the Christian Platonism of St. Augustine” (“Cause,” 202-3). With the exception of one remarkable image which Coleridge appears to have taken from Augustine’s *Confessions* (which I will discuss later, and which Lowes seems to have missed), Stuart’s reading tends to establish general theological parallels in the prose writings of Coleridge and Augustine, while applying these to the general narrative structure. I will build on Stuart’s argument by giving a closer reading of *The Rime* in the context of Augustine’s account of the origin of evil articulated in his *Confessions* and *The City of God*.<sup>11</sup>

I begin with the central action of the poem: the shooting of the albatross,

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971): 204.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1956-71), I:154.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993): 298. Coleridge argues that evil is common to all humans, and has a common ground in the human will. “And this evil Ground we call Original Sin. It is a *Mystery*, that is, a *Fact*, which we see, but cannot explain, and the doctrine a truth which we apprehend, but can neither comprehend nor communicate” (*Aids*, 288).

<sup>10</sup> See John A. Stuart “Augustine and ‘The Ancient Mariner’” *Modern Language Notes* 76 (1961): 116-20; and “The Augustinian ‘Cause of Action’ in Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’” *The Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 177-211. See also Elliott B. Gose, Jr., “Coleridge and the Luminous Gloom: An Analysis of the ‘Symbolical Language’ in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’” *PMLA* 75 (1960): 239, for a discussion of Augustine’s idea of original sin as informing Coleridge’s representation of the Mariner’s act of killing the Albatross.

<sup>11</sup> See “Cause,” 203-11.

which in its sheer motivelessness renders the act arbitrary and meaningless. Wordsworth's critical view that the Mariner "does not act, but is continually acted upon,"<sup>12</sup> indicates this point.<sup>13</sup> But the lack of motive, and the passivity of the action, are in fact the key points to understanding the nature of sin, in the context of Augustinian thought. In the telling of the Mariner's act of killing the albatross, the act is read by the Wedding Guest on the face of the Mariner, who recounts the action in the past tense: "God save thee, ancient Marinere! / "From the fiends that plague thee thus— / "Why look'st thou so?"—with my cross bow / I shot the Albatross." Nothing prepares for this, and the shock of horror registers with the terseness and finality of the statement, uttered in a purely factual manner. It is motiveless, and in terms of the narrative, the present of the action is elided, slipped into the past, and so, unrecoverable. And this is precisely the point in the Augustinian account of sin. In *The City of God*, Augustine claims that sin is not a positive force, but the opposition of nothingness to being, since God is being, and sin is its opposite. Similarly, sin is the insertion of nothingness into being by the will, and so, is causeless, having no prior cause in being. As Augustine points out: "Let no one, therefore, look for an efficient cause of the evil will; for it is not efficient, but deficient, as the will itself is not an affecting of something, but a defect."<sup>14</sup> As such, the cause of sin is unknowable, a mystery, without prior motive. Augustine expresses this in the following paradox: "For those things which are known not by their actuality, but by their want of it are known...by not knowing them, that by knowing them they may not be known" (387). This notion of the unintelligibility of the cause of sin is written into the narrative of the Mariner's central act; the sheer economy of expression, its disconnection from prior events in the narrative and its insertion in the past tense after the interruption by the Wedding Guest, represents a known action as an unintelligible one. The passivity of the action indicates its defectiveness, its deficiency as an act. Its narrative form divides what comes before from what comes after; it is an act that introduces a fissure, dividing cause and effect, but in such a way as to introduce a new form of causation that follows its own logic: the logic of sin.<sup>15</sup>

The Mariner's killing of the albatross appears like a wound in the tissue of the narrative, with the effect of the act being felt in the natural world almost immediately. Milton's claim that with the entrance of sin into the world,

<sup>12</sup> William Wordsworth "Lyrical Ballads," and Other Poems, 1797-1800, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1992): 791.

<sup>13</sup> As George Watson argues: "The point of emphasis is not that the Mariner sins and repents—though this, of course, is not false—but that both sin and repentance are visited upon him. The Mariner is simply not felt to be morally responsible, as he would be in any ordinary Christian parable. Indeed his passivity is insisted upon" (*Coleridge the Poet* [London: Routledge, 1966]: 97).

<sup>14</sup> Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library): 387.

<sup>15</sup> In a remarkable reflection, recorded in the notebooks in May 1804, which mirrors both the circumstances of the killing of the albatross, and the causal explanation of that act, Coleridge describes a scene in which sailors attempt to shoot a hawk off the mast of a ship, for no other reason than that it can be done. Coleridge reflects: "O Strange Lust of Murder in Man!—It is not cruelty/ it is mere non-feeling from non-thinking" (CN II: 2090). The account of evil, in *The Rime*, as a negation of the will without prior motive, is here repeated.

“Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe,”<sup>16</sup> can be seen as an interpretive key for explaining this turn in the narrative. The idea is Biblical, as seen in St. Paul’s remark “that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now....” (Rom. 18:22) Coleridge seems to have been thinking about the causal effect of human action on nature, in precisely this spiritual manner, as a notebook entry from this time suggests, which reads: “([A] fine epitheton of Man would be, Lord of Fire and Light.—All other Creatures, whose existence we perceive, are mere Alms-receivers of both.)” (CN I 331) But the manner in which the consequences of the killing of the bird visits the Mariner’s crew-mates seems to follow upon their assigning a causal effect to the act, at turns blaming and praising the Mariner, depending upon the meteorological conditions in the vicinity of the ship. Many critics have argued that this marks a deeply disturbing view of the world that undermines a Christian reading of the poem.

But Frances Ferguson, who agrees with this interpretation, pays attention to the interpretive acts of the crew-mates which link the killing with the effects on nature, suggesting that they are implicated in some way. Ferguson states:

Since the Mariner did the killing when they only expressed opinions about it, their fate seems cruel indeed. But the implication seems to be that every interpretation involves a moral commitment with consequences that are inevitably more far-reaching and unpredictable than one could have imagined.<sup>17</sup>

Again, the unintelligibility of the act comes into play, raising the problem of how to interpret the connection between human actions and natural events into a meaningful relation, a problem which is in fact one that is faced by the Mariner and his shipmates.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine’s account of the structural trajectory of sin—its origin in the will as it is directed to objects in creation—offers a schematic for interpreting the narrative sequence of *The Rime*. In Book VII of his *Confessions*, in his exploration of the cause of sin, Augustine turns from conceiving God in creation, and therefore attributing evil to God (since evil exists in the world), to conceiving of God as above creation, with creation considered as good. In what is the precise center of his narrative Augustine announces the central idea around which the whole of the *Confessions* is organized, in this colloquy to God:

And I considered the other things below you, and I saw that neither

<sup>16</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. IX: 782-3, in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

<sup>17</sup> Frances Ferguson, Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*, ed. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987): 257.

<sup>18</sup> David Miall has perhaps best summarized this kind of argument in the following way: “The Mariner’s sufferings are greatly out of proportion in comparison with what seems a relatively trivial crime; the death of the rest of the crew is even more so. In the universe envisioned in the poem, as Edward Bostetter concluded, man is ‘at the mercy of arbitrary and unpredictable forces’” (“Guilt and Death,” 636).

can they be said absolutely to be or absolutely not to be. They are because they come from you. But they are not because they are not what you are. That which truly is is that which unchangeably abides. But 'it is good for me to stick fast to God' (Ps. 72:28); for if I do not abide in him, I can do nothing (John 15:5). But he 'abiding in himself makes all things new' (Wisd. 7:27).<sup>19</sup>

The error of sin is this: to choose, as one's fundamental orientation, that which is created rather than that which is uncreated. It is to choose a lesser good rather than a higher. This explains Augustine's point, made previously, that sin is unintelligible, for who would make such a choice but one with a defective will? It implies a metaphysical error: that of taking creation for an absolute, rather than a relative, good, of turning created things into idols. That error introduces evil, which is a nothingness, into the heart of being, which is a created good. And this is the error of the shipmates, who explain the operations of nature as being influenced by the Albatross, the bird of good omen under the aegis of the Spirit, of whom the crew says: "Nine fathom deep he had follow'd us / From the Land of Mist and Snow" (*LB*, 14). The pagan attitude is one that is clear in the narrative, placing it in the ambit of Augustinian argumentation, which was largely directed at paganism as a religious belief, and one that struck Augustine personally, since he himself had been committed to it in his earlier days. Augustine had been a Manichean in his youth, and the idea of primeval forces of good and evil clearly appear to be at work in *The Rime*. But Wordsworth's suggestion that the narrative theme of the poem should focus on the killing of a bird who is avenged by "the tutelary spirits of these regions" (as quoted in Lowes 215), is not the structural frame of the entire narrative, but is itself framed by the sequence of events. The belief that nature is explainable by such causes is the metaphysical assumption that underlies the sinful attitude that sees creation as an absolute, not a relative good, and turns created things into idols. Seen in the context of Augustine's account of the origin of sin, the Mariner's actions and the crew's judgment of that action suggest that it is the very error of failing to see a God outside of creation that leads to sinful actions. The killing of the Albatross, and the hanging of the Albatross around the Mariner's neck, are symbols of this failure of thought and will. Instead of seeing the Albatross as a creature of God, created good, but not itself the source of good, it is given a god-like influence, transformed into an idol that in death is given a talismanic significance: "Instead of the Cross the Albatross / About my neck was hung" (*LB*, 14).

The theology of the doctrine of original sin suggests how the Mariner's crew-mates are implicated in his act. This is expressed by Augustine as the unity of human nature represented in Adam, whereby all participate in sin (*City*, 406). This is the understanding of the doctrine that Coleridge defends in his letter to George: how all are implicated is a mystery, but it explains the

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993): 124.

brokenness, or fallen nature of all humans, while maintaining the goodness of God and of creation. It calls all Christians to the acceptance of responsibility for sin; and it was the major theme of Augustine's *Confessions*, the greatest spiritual biography in the history of Christianity. It is a process that the Mariner undergoes in Sections III and IV of the poem. Some readers view the terrifying circumstances which the Mariner suffers as being bereft of faith. The evidence is everywhere in these sections, but perhaps is most plaintively articulated in the lines: "Alone, alone, all all alone / Alone on the wide wide Sea; / And Christ would take no pity on / My soul in agony."<sup>20</sup> Clearly the figure of Death and her compeer, and the dead men's bodies who remain at work, dominate the imagery of this section. The game of dice perhaps refers again to the seemingly arbitrary manner in which death is dealt in human affairs, and the mystery of suffering that is at the heart of human experience. But the vision here is one of the Mariner's own making and of his own imagining, and represents the way sin deals death to the world through disordered desire. In Book IV of *Confessions* Augustine links the experience of death with an aesthetics of pleasure which can explain the Mariner's predicament. For Augustine, loving the creatures of this world absolutely, without reference to God, leads to despair, as he points out when his friend dies. He states: "'Grief darkened my heart' (Lam. 5:17). Everything on which I set my gaze was death.... My eyes looked for him everywhere, and he was not there. I hated everything because they did not have him...." (*Confessions*, 57) The origin of this lies in the way the thing is loved, in disordered desire, as Augustine argues: "I loved beautiful things of a lower order, and I was going down to the depths. I used to say to my friends: 'Do we love anything except that which is beautiful?'" (*Confessions*, 64) Augustine goes on to indicate that the beautiful shape of bodies, which gives rise to desire for the pleasure of material things, is the internal source of this disordered love. The opposite then is true: that which is ugly is despised, hated, considered evil. As such, the desire for physical beauty leads to a metaphysics of evil that congeals into a phenomenological vision of the world issuing in despair when the object of desire is removed. This is the vision of the Mariner, who lives on in a world inhabited by "a million million slimy things." This vision marks the objective form of disordered desire; it is continuous with the act of shooting the Albatross, and brings that act to its logical conclusion. It is a world which the Mariner is allowed to experience, a world created by his own will, as many readers, including Harold Bloom, have argued is the major sin of the Mariner.<sup>21</sup>

The Mariner's claim that "...Christ would take no pity on / My soul in agony," is the projected despair of the soul who seeks its own will absolutely.

<sup>20</sup> Raimonda Modiano, in reading these lines, claims: "Here is a voice that expresses unrelieved, naked, desperate suffering. It is the voice of a man with no place to go, no one to turn to, least of all providential aid" (Modiano, "Historicist Readings of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Ljé*, ed. Nicholas Roe [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001]: 275.

<sup>21</sup> See Harold Bloom, Introduction to *Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986): 2.



The poem then represents the soul left to its own devices. But what appears to the Mariner as the absence of God is really the means back to God, as the Mariner is allowed to live in a world apparently bereft of the presence of God, and therefore, without goodness. In a *Notebook* entry from this time, Coleridge marked five stages of prayer which correspond to the narrative structure of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

Prayer—

First Stage—the pressure of immediate calamities without earthly abundance makes us cry out to the Invisible—

Second Stage—the dreariness of visible things to a mind beginning to be contemplative—horrible Solitude

Third Stage—Repentance & Regret—& Self-inquietude.

4th stage—The celestial delectation that follows ardent prayer—

5th stage—self-annihilation—the Soul enters the Holy of Holies.—

Clearly, the first two stages correspond to the Mariner's predicament of isolation, leading to repentance and regret that issues in claiming responsibility for his transgression, as indicated in the acknowledgement of the horror "In the curse in a dead man's eye" (LB, 23). This leads to a reorientation of vision, and the introduction of the startlingly beautiful image, in the stanza immediately following: "The moving Moon went up the sky / And no where did abide: / Softly she was going up / And a star or two beside" (LB, 23). The image and cadence recall the Platonic imagery of the *Timaeus*, in which Socrates describes the stars in the Heaven as a "moving likeness of eternity."<sup>22</sup> And it is an image that prepares the Mariner to appreciate the beautiful vision of the "water-snakes" (LB, 24). As John Stuart has pointed out in the articles previously mentioned, the image of the water-snakes is taken from Book VII of Augustine's *Confessions*, entitled "A Neoplatonic Quest." Immediately after his conversion, in which, as I have previously indicated, Augustine establishes the dual principles of the goodness of creation and the source of evil in the human will (which Augustine claims was mediated by his discovery of Platonic philosophy's claim that the soul is above the body), he argues that because of their participation in the unity of being derived from God, even the lowly worms are to be admired for their beauty. It is those who have a disordered love of things, as he once had, that fail to see the beauty in all beings, and proclaiming them to be evil. Augustine claims: "The wicked are displeased by your justice, even more by vipers and the worm which you created good, being well fitted for the lower parts of your creation" (*Confessions*, 126). As such, all things are to be loved both for their beautiful form, their unity of life as an individual being, and for their place in the order of creation. But all praise is to be referred to God, in the proper ordering of love:

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Francis M. Cornford (New York: Macmillan, 1985): 29.

It is far from my mind now to say, 'Would that those things [lowly parts of the universe] did not exist!' ...[N]ow even when they are taken alone, my duty is to praise you for them. That you are to be praised is shown by dragons on earth, and all deeps, fire, hail, snow, ice, the hurricane and tempest, which perform your word—mountains and all hills, fruitful trees and all cedars, beasts and all cattle, reptiles and winged birds...." (*Confessions*, 125)

It is this vision of things that overturns Augustine's earlier aesthetics of pleasure in which beauty gives physical delight, and ugliness is identified with evil. Augustine's vision of creation in which all things with being are good and beautiful does not admit of this position: "'There is no health' (Ps. 37:4, 8) in those who are displeased by an element in your creation, just as there was none in me when I was displeased by many things you had made" (*Confessions*, 126). Many of the elements in Augustine's catalogue of things that appear as beautiful under God's ordering make their appearance in *The Rime*. However, the Mariner's despairing vision of creation is grounded in a metaphysics of despair that fails to see the good in created beings as coming from God. Now, in a manner unlooked for, this is replaced by a vision that sees the beautiful even in the lowly snakes. The Mariner's vision of things as beautiful precedes the springing of love and blessing from his heart, thereby overturning the nightmare world which his own will had imposed upon creation. These lines enact the shift in vision which transforms the snakes from ugliness to beauty:

Beyond the shadow of the ship  
 I watched the water-snakes:  
 They mov'd in tracks of shining white;  
 And when they rear'd, the elfish light  
 Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship  
 I watch'd their rich attire:  
 Blue, glossy green, and velvet black  
 They coil'd and swam; and every track  
 Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! No tongue  
 Their beauty might declare:  
 A spring of love gush't from my heart,  
 And I bless'd them unaware!  
 Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
 And I blessed them unaware. (*LB*, 24-5)

The great moment of Augustine's conversion, in which he turns from contemplation of God to creation seen as caused by God, and hence judged to be good, can be read as a gloss on the Mariner's conversion: "I turned to gaze

on other things. I saw that to you they owe their existence, and that... you hold all things in your hand by your truth” (*Confessions*, 126).

This vision issues in a prayer, with the Albatross immediately and miraculously falling from Mariner’s neck. The vision is linked with the blessing and prayer in a unified action, and it is clear we are in what Coleridge referred to in the notebook entry on prayer cited above as the fourth stage of prayer: “The celestial delectation that follows ardent prayer.” Many critics have complained that the prayer is passively performed, but it would be better to say that prayer is received by the Mariner, as all prayer is received in an act that does not initiate, but corresponds to, God’s grace. As J. Robert Barth has pointed out, the Mariner’s act is like all prayer, which “is a supernatural act, prompted by and enabled by God, and the response to this grace is the human act of putting oneself into God’s hands.”<sup>23</sup> Barth’s reading, which links prayer, love, and blessing in the Mariner’s act of seeing the water-snakes as beautiful, suggests how the concluding moral can be brought into the ambit of an Augustinian interpretation of *The Rime*. However, many scholars have complained that the moral is trite.<sup>24</sup> The stanza, often repeated, bears repeating again: “He prayeth best who loveth best, / All things both great and small: / For the dear God, who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (*LB*, 50). Most criticism centers upon Coleridge’s own response to the stanza, recorded in his *Table Talk*, in which he claims to have responded to Barbauld’s complaint that the poem lacked a unifying moral: “I told her in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination.”<sup>25</sup> As Frances Ferguson has pointed out, the concluding moral follows the outline of Barbauld’s primers, which taught that the inculcation of Christian virtue could be fostered by teaching concern for animals, and that a common “theme in primer literature of the time was the sinfulness of cruelty to animals—particularly birds” (Ferguson, 255). And as David Perkins has shown, the ethical treatment of animals was intimately linked with the inculcation of Christian morals.<sup>26</sup> Perkins concludes that, “Clearly, the ‘moral’ of Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798) was not unusual in its time” (Perkins, 5).

In the context of the prevailing religious temper of the time, Coleridge’s claim that the moral of the poem was too openly displayed can be understood. And seen in the context of an Augustinian account of sin, the narrative of the

<sup>23</sup> J. Robert Barth, “‘A Spring of Love’: Prayer and Blessing in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*” *The Wordsworth Circle* 30 (1999): 75.

<sup>24</sup> As James Engell succinctly puts it, the poem ends with a moral statement that is “too easy...which the narrative cannot easily justify” (Engell, “Coleridge [and His Mariner] on the Soul: ‘As an exile in a far distant land,’” in *The Fountain Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion in Honor of John L. Mahoney*, ed. J. Robert Barth [New York: Fordham UP, 2002], 144).

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, 2 vols., ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990): II, 272-3.

<sup>26</sup> See David Perkins, “Religion and Animal Rights in the Romantic Era,” in *The Fountain Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion in Honor of John L. Mahoney*, ed. J. Robert Barth (New York: Fordham UP, 2002), 144).

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poem can be seen to be consistent with the concluding moral. That moral contains within itself a metaphysical vision of created beings that is at the heart of Christianity. And it is a vision that is at the heart of Augustine's great spiritual autobiography, articulated in this address to God also found in Book VII of his *Confessions*: "Hence I saw and it was made clear to me that you made all things good, and there are absolutely no substances which you did not make. As you did not make all things equal, all things are good in the sense that taken individually they are good, and all things taken together are very good. For our God has made 'all things very good' (Gen. 1:31)" (*Confessions*, 125). But if the moral of the poem is clear, with the metaphysical principle of the goodness of creation apparent on the surface of this moral claim, the source of the presence of evil in the poem has remained a mystery. And in presenting the presence of evil as a mystery in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge, having just moved from a deterministic philosophy of Necessity which grounded his Unitarian theology, to a sense of the individual's responsibility for sinful actions, in what is the beginning of a gradual movement toward a more orthodox Christian Trinitarian theology, remains faithful to the greatest Christian writer on sin: St. Augustine. In representing the Augustinian teaching on the origin of evil as issuing from the will, Coleridge's poem has preserved the mystery of sin, which can be made intelligible only by being represented as an unintelligibility. Perhaps he has succeeded in this too well.