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The Question of the Uncanny in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

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SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE'S 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' produces the effect of, and therefore in some ways is about, the uncanny.

But what is the uncanny? Freud suggested the *quidditas*, something essential hidden in the heart of things, and the 'source' of this horror is associated with such phenomena as phantoms, unlikely coincidences, the evil eye, and portents imminent fatality.¹ In 'The Rime', these would be the dead albatross, the slimy sea creatures, the ghosts and corpses of the Mariner's crew, the coming of death upon a frightening ship, and even the inexplicable 'agony' which gives the Mariner a 'strange power of speech' and forces the telling of the 'ghastly tale' (ll. 584-5), as well as the ability to choose 'the man that must hear' the tale (ll. 589-90).

However, even to Freud these elements are not sufficient. He goes on to argue that stories with horrific images would fail to produce the effect of uncanniness unless written in a singularly skilful way.² Coleridge certainly did not lack the craft. For instance, the excellent choice of the first and last lines of Part 1: 'It is an ancient Mariner' and 'I shot the Albatross', convey immediate dramatic effect. They situate the physical action, the issues at stake, as well as the possible moral quarrel about them. Word choice, rhyme, rhythm, combined with the imagery, create the effect of the uncanny, but do not in themselves explain it.

Furthermore, Freud explains that the cause or source of the uncanny are the 'animistic modes of thinking', that is, 'in reality nothing new or alien, but... familiar... which has become alienated... through the process of repression'.³ It is not really the killing of Albatross and ruining his crew as a repressed trauma that comes back to haunt him. It is two different modes of being-in-the-world occurring simultaneously: the one in which everything has meaning, and the other in which nothing does. The Mariner never has the chance to forget the supposed initial trauma, because a whole range of ghastly phenomena comes along, which he interprets as haunting modes of punishment. He cannot stop reasoning and interpreting. He claims 'till my ghastly tale is told, / This heart within me burns' (ll. 584-5). In fact, he feels better afterwards, as if after psychotherapy. Yet his 'agony' produces his hyper-dirge anew.

Similar to the Mariner's, another gesture at explaining the haunting horror lies in the marginal notes. Added later by Coleridge, they stir the reading into the safer zone of (proper) interpretation. It is an appropriation of the uncanny

¹ Freud took over Schelling's term *das Unheimliche* defined as 'something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light'. See Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. XVII: 218-256.

² Freud 247.

³ Freud 241.

experienced in the reading into a clear-cut moral tale of sin and repentance. When we try keeping track of the comments we lose the horrific energy of the poem. Yet, if we re-read paying no attention to the gloss, we find that it is re-invested with the uncanny. Beside Coleridge's notes, much academic writing on the theme of the supernatural and horrific in the poem still tends towards demystification of the most compelling elements. David Miall rightly points out that when facing 'an experience profoundly strange... we become anxious to locate it in some existing system of knowledge'.⁴ Interpretations tend to move towards controllable areas.⁵

The poem, however, pulls us into the realm of the uncanny from the beginning. Like the Mariner's glittering eye, it seduces those open to the experience of the tale. Though forced by 'woeful agony' (ll. 579-80), the Mariner begins with the joyful mood of the expedition:

The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the light house top. (ll. 21-24, 1834)

One imagines a wedding would be like this, and indeed the wedding guest hears 'the loud basoon' and 'merry minstrelsy' (ll. 32, 36). The cheerful atmosphere is contrasted with the Mariner's invocation of the inexplicable 'storm-blast... tyrannous and strong' (ll. 41-4). From this stanza on, the fight between oppositions is constant. Yet, the same force is often at one moment terrifying, and soon afterwards perceived as innocuous. For instance, the wind is firstly an unwelcome storm. Later the lack of wind is just as ominous: 'We stuck, nor breath nor motion' (l. 116). The 'good south wind', the 'fair breeze' (ll. 87, 103) takes the crew to 'that silent sea' (l. 106), where there is no wind and the hanging sails are 'sad as sad could be' (l. 108).

The silence out in the open sea is a form of the uncanny. It is oppressive. The crew speaks 'only to break' it (ll. 109-10). Later, silence 'sank / Like music on my heart' (ll. 498-9). Every image changes from positive to negative, or vice versa, given the mood of the (interpreter) Mariner. His tale is an attempt at the appropriation of the uncanny, and finishes with the lesson to be learned, 'He prayeth best who loveth best / All things both great and small' (ll. 614-5). If this is the closing explanation, why is he still in 'agony'?

Via the gloss, a persona of the author imposes theoretical views and judgements on the poem to give it a distinct and comprehensible meaning. Internal inconsistencies are passed over by the prior claim of reasonable order. The Mariner's devastating confrontation with the uncanny is lost because meaning is constructed through the gloss.

⁴ Miall 633.

⁵ E.g. for Miall, the meaning of the poem 'may be assimilated to our understanding of Christian redemptive processes' (Miall 633), whereas for Ulmer 'no theological paradigm survives the nightmarish ironies of Coleridge's tale' (Ulmer 327).

The difficulty with the uncanny lies in the fact that it is not a thing, worldly or otherworldly. To identify it is to destroy it. Freud professes that 'knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree',⁶ and that 'we have to admit that none of this helps us to understand the extraordinarily strong feeling of something uncanny'.⁷ He further expresses wonder at the fact that in other stories the same elements are funny rather than frightening, or even scary without being uncanny: the 'severed hand in... Rhampsinitus has no uncanny effect in the way the severed hand has in Hauff's story'.⁸

The plethora of interpretational possibilities effects the simultaneous experience of both meaningfulness and meaninglessness. The Christian ideas are in conflict with essential uncanniness of the otherwise inexplicable events, and force 'upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of "chance"'.⁹ This is not a state of relativism and a blur due to the 'diacritical nature of meaning' since no 'datum is meaningful in itself', as Clark claims.¹⁰ Derrida notes that 'each time the word *unheimlich* appears in Freud's text... one can localize an uncontrollable undecidability in the axiomatics, the epistemology, the logic, the order of the discourse and of thethetic or theoretic statements'.¹¹

Heidegger believed that the source of the uncanny lies within our own humanity.¹² In the poem, the Mariner both wields the power to convey the uncanny, while being *horrified* by it. The Mariner holds a firm grip on his tale, and is haunted by an urge to tell it. The poem does not suppose any repression, which then seeps into the open. The 'familiar' uncanny has not been pushed down into the unconscious. To Heidegger, the familiar or intimate is something we always experience, but which is hidden by our daily concerns. We are not wavering between two zones of the psyche, but two modes of experience of one and the same issue-at-stake.¹³ That is why the telling of the tale has no psychoanalytic effect on the Mariner. The bird disappears in dark waters like a piece of lead, but what constitutes all the horror remains. The wandering poet keeps telling the dirge, keeps daring.¹⁴

If we were then to claim that the poem, as human diction, imprisons the uncanny in its framework, within a secure zone of experience, it would thus become a *de facto* failure, because the rational has contained the uncanny,

⁶ Freud 230.

⁷ Freud 236.

⁸ Freud 250-2. He ascribes this to the mode of presentation, e.g., in Wilde's *Canterville Ghost* the supernatural is ridiculed, and therefore not uncanny.

⁹ Freud 237.

¹⁰ Timothy Clark. *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) 4.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: UCP, 1995) 46, 94. Freud's comment was: 'one cannot not believe in them and...one ought not to believe in them'.

¹² Martin Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Fried Gregory and Polt Richard (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹³ The expression 'issue-at-stake' is Heidegger's way of circumscribing the word 'thing' when analysing that which does not belong to thing-ness.

¹⁴ Daring is the ability of dwelling with the uncanny, or what Keats called negative capability (not in the sense of nihilism).

despite the ever present sense of danger. Yet I think this logical development of one possible line of argument is an invalid claim. Why?

Here, we might find useful Heidegger's idea that 'violent taming of the violent is either victory or defeat'.¹⁵ The 'violent taming' harbours a twofold movement. Firstly, there is an attempt to unleash the uncanny. Secondly, it is done with the manacles of poetic devices. In this way, it is violent preservation, but also a daring, *tolma*, which makes the meeting with this uncanny possible, at the same time as it is a kind of disguising of it.¹⁶

We began by asking the question 'What is the uncanny?', which demands a determination, but any answer would lead us astray, because it would confine its being to a definite form.¹⁷ For instance, is the uncanny bound to the mystical or holy qualities of the bird? Yes and no. The Mariner and the crew can never settle on the most probable possibility, because these are all often as plausible as incredible. The Mariner has no reason to, but he kills the albatross. The crew give this deed great significance. They hang the dead bird on his neck as a symbol of their interpretation, but even the spirits they meet are baffled. The 'first voice' of the strange spirit finds the circumstances incomprehensible:

But tell me, tell me! Speak again
Thy soft response renewing—
What makes that ship drive on so fast?
What is the ocean doing? (ll. 410-4)

The 'second voice' speculates, 'Still as a slave before his lord, / The ocean has no blast' (ll. 414-5). The voices suspect the peculiar coincidences are bound to the killing of the albatross, but are left in haze as to what is really going on. It is as if all the terrifying elements including the spirits, which indeed contribute in the effect of the uncanny, are themselves dependent on it for their haunting qualities.

The Mariner says, 'With my cross-bow / I shot the Albatross' (ll. 81-2). Then there is a cut, and 'The sun now rose upon the right' (l. 83). Everything seems in order. If the horror that follows is based on the killing as sin, and has a punitive essence, then it has order in it. Nothing comes out of order by simply becoming supernatural, because the prefix 'super' points to another level of 'natural' (as claimed in the epigraph). The Albatross, for instance, changes from the welcomed guest, to the symbol of a sin demanding

¹⁵ Heidegger 172.

¹⁶ Heidegger 183-4.

¹⁷ Ultimately, it is incorrect to use 'It is' about that which constitutes the possibility of 'is' (existence). The uncanny may not 'be', but it is not nihilistic nothingness, not in the domain of irrationality. The slimy and beautiful creatures 'are' (l. 360), but the uncanny does not belong to 'is'.

atonement.¹⁸

The fascinating thing is that the threat does not really disappear when atonement is reached, when the albatross disappears, and when the sea and the sky become beneficent. The reason for the Mariner's deed is still lacking. Having lacked, it will always be lacking.¹⁹ Does this mean the act had to do with the man's nature? Perhaps out of, or beyond this nature? Or an act of a devil or God upon the poor soul? Was it an act of necessity? An act of passion? Or an act devoid of 'inner' psychological drive? Was the Mariner predestined? Such interpretations are possible, but dependence on them will undermine the uncanny. If the poem hints at an internal, logocentric order, it has the effect of *tranquilising* the uncanny, and the marginal notes enforce this tranquilization and are perhaps the result of the poet being terrified by what the poem conveys, and which is beyond his control. The Mariner cannot settle on any of the options that might figure out the efficient cause, and as the Mariner cannot settle, so we should not.

The stanza 'Water, water, every where... Nor any drop to drink' (ll. 119-122) is glossed: 'Albatross begins to be avenged'. But surely the eerie and oppressive 'silence of the sea' (l. 110), the hot and 'bloody sun' (l. 112), and the lack of wind were already instances of punishment, if we apply the same signification logic of the Mariner. It is interesting that there is no comment to the stanza that can be read in terms of theology:

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust. (ll. 244-7)

If the Mariner is praying for forgiveness, does the grim answer come from an unforgiving God? The Mariner tells the wedding guest that 'never a saint took pity on / My soul in agony' (ll. 234-5). Why is the whisper wicked? What is the answer in it? Then, on the other hand, the Mariner suddenly gains another vision, that of light, shine, glossiness, colour, golden fire (ll. 274-81). Now his 'kind saint took pity' on him (l. 286). The life-saving rain is the sign from the Blessed Virgin (ll. 294-300), and he feels like a forgiven, 'blessed ghost' (l. 308). Every time the Mariner states something about the meaning of the events and things, he appears to be certain, only to state something completely different

¹⁸ In the centuries following 'The Rime', the image of the albatross has kept its symbolic potential. But the quality of any symbol inscribes it into a doxa within which it works. In a post-modern use, as intertext in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Albatross's employment revokes the uncanny in Coleridge's poem. However, the symbol becomes next to ridiculous and mundane, as in the Monty Python Hollywood show. Further, Paul de Mann reads Coleridgean symbol (elaborated in the Manual) as mystifying and contrasts it to allegory and irony, which are then qualified as demystifying, because, Hipolito claims, Coleridge's idea of symbol 'renders all relations internal, and so melts all differences and discontinuities into an ultimate noumenal mush'. See Jeffrey Hipolito, 'Coleridge, Hermeneutics, and the Ends of Metaphysics', *European Romantic Review* 15:4 (2004) 551.

¹⁹ Coleridge was very aware of 'motiveless malignity' – his characterization of Iago, and also of actions that occurred as result of non-feeling and non-thinking. See CN II 2090, for the shooting of a hawk in the rigging of one of the boats in his convoy on the way to Malta.

later on. What was one moment the voice of Virgin Mary is now the voice of the angels, then of the (Polar) spirit. He says that the '... spirit slid: and it was he / That made the ship to go' (ll. 379-80). But then the angelic voice wonders 'why drives on that ship so fast / Without or wave or wind?' (422-3). The Mariner is thrown from one to the other meaning, constantly forgiven and yet having to do penance, if that is what it is. There is an insurmountable gap between the ground of his interpretations and the report of the events. Coleridge's note to the lines 442-445 reads: 'The curse is finally expiated'. Then, why ask the Hermit to 'shrieve' him (l. 574), when Virgin Mary has sanctioned him peace?

The Mariner is embedded in Life-in-Death, or 'being alive in the world while being dead to it'. This complicated collocation hints at the inquiry 'What manner of man art thou?' The suggestion is that he is alive and fully interacting with the worldly (and otherworldly) things, but still detached from them. He has no place, and is not in a limbo. He has contact with people, and is not an immortal-yet-placeless ghost: 'Fear not... / This body drop not down' (ll. 230-1), and further:

I pass like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach. (ll. 586-90)

Though unable to account for his tale-telling, he assumes the reason for it is to 'teach'. He leaves the wedding guest with: 'He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast' (ll. 612-3). Can we really accept that this is the final moral of the poem? The acquired forgiveness and the incessant penance do not fit the narrative. At one specific moment, seeing sea creatures in their splendour as a part of grander design, he is drawn to the spectacle, and sees the possibility of being a part of the plan. The symbol of his supposed sin, the counter-talisman, falls off his chest (ll. 272-291). It is interesting that he seems to have been forgiven even before he could (willingly) pray for forgiveness, 'A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessed them unaware' (ll. 284-5). But the strife between meaningfulness and nihilism continues. He is stuck in the world yet the lack of reason in that irretrievable past moment keeps the ultimate healing impossible. Further, nihilism is present only 'seemingly'. It only seems that out in the open sea God is lacking (ll. 596-600), just as the old oak stump is rotten under 'the moss that wholly hides' it (ll. 521-2).

Heidegger too connects the uncanny and nihilism. He starts off with 'fear',²⁰ which is '*a derivative phenomenon*',²¹ and founded in the uncanny. Fear is fear of something 'detrimental, as Aristotle says, *κακον*, *malum*, an evil...

²⁰ Martin Heidegger. *History of the Concept of Time*. trans. Theodore Kisiel (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992).

²¹ Heidegger 284.

always something definite... breaking into the familiar world of concerned preoccupation... a *malum futurum*... which in its imminent approach can also fail to appear'.²² Fear becomes dread when what we experience does not appear 'by way of a definite reference... in its meaningfulness', but that of which we can say 'It was really nothing'. Dread is then the dread of nothingness, which to Heidegger is 'the world in its very worldhood', which 'does not give itself like a world thing'.²³ We could see this as meaningless 'nihilistic nothing'. However, it is exactly the sense of fatefulness of our own 'being-in-the-world' in strife with nihilism that is the uncanny.

As a final example, the figure of 'Life-in-Death... Who thicks man's blood with cold' (ll. 193-4) casts dice with Death, wins and disappears. The Mariner is not granted the benevolence of death. He would very much like to submit to death, but 'Life-in-Death' won. What terrifies the poet is not Burkean 'king of terrors', death,²⁴ nor a simple act of 'rivalry to God'.²⁵ The Mariner keeps engaging in all kinds of discourses. He wanders around, telling his tale, interacting, has feelings and opinions, gives lectures through his story, but he is nevertheless dead to the world. Heidegger sees this state as the experience of being-fallen-in-the-world, being the one who gives meaning to it, while it has no meaning. This was the Freudian concern with the uncanny, the simultaneous experience of fate and 'nothingness'. This is the state to which the Mariner returns all the time, and the state to which readers will come if they dwell on the poem as it stands, without an intense search for meaning. The poem opens up the possibility of experience of the uncanny, and dread and fear may fall upon all readers who do not seek to escape into a safe or rational or explicable world.

²² Heidegger 286.

²³ Heidegger 290.

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 36.

²⁵ George Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) 55.