The Shadow-Line: 'Alone on a wide, wide sea'

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CONRAD'S NOVELLA, *THE SHADOW-LINE*, WAS SERIALISED in six weekly instalments in New York's Metropolitan Magazine during September and October 1916. It recounts the tale of an unnamed young sailor who, in a moment of discontent, gives up his position as ship's officer, unsure of his next step. As he awaits his passage home, he falls into company with an older man, the retired Captain Giles, who seems to exert an uncanny influence in the port, finally securing for the young man an unexpected captaincy. There is some uncertainty about the fate of the former captain of his new ship. The novella's main action follows events at sea: periods of becalming, storm and fever among the crew, and suggests that these adverse events could be the malign influence of his predecessor's ghost. The voyage tests the young sailor's mettle and concludes with his successful return to port.

The advertisement for the first edition of 1917 announces the work as 'a Far-Eastern story of a haunted ship, and might be fitly described as the prose counterpart of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* though it owes nothing except a hint of atmosphere to that immortal poem'. By the time the second edition was published in 1920, however, Conrad had decided to add an author's note. It is surprising to see that his very first sentence here, in apparent contradiction of the original advertisement, asserts that it 'was not intended to touch on the supernatural'.[1] He takes issue with the fact that 'more than one critic … has been inclined … to take it … beyond the confines of the world of … living, suffering humanity'. He contends that 'The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is', and seems deliberately to separate the natural world wholly from what he dismisses as 'the mere supernatural'.

The relationship between these two elements, which Conrad seems to regard here as opposed and mutually exclusive, provides a clear tension in the work. The advertised connection with Coleridge's poem asks us to consider in what ways the realms of the natural and the supernatural might relate to each other. Originally published in Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, which set out to explore these two modes of seeing the world, *The Rime* is an unequivocal exploration of a supernatural experience. In the 1800 preface to the second edition of the poems, Wordsworth describes the intention behind the work as a whole as being to take 'incidents and situations from common life, and … at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect'. He does not suggest that the two elements of the *Ballads* are at odds with each other and, in fact, his analysis of those concerns which are the province of the poet of nature—'the operation of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; with storms and sunshine, with revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with

[1] *The Shadow-Line, A Confession*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad, eds. J.H. Stape and Allan H. Simmons, (Cambridge UP 2013) p.5.

injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow'—seem, intentional or not, an uncanny description of events in Coleridge's *Rime.*

In his author's note Conrad describes the novella 'to be in its brevity a fairly complex piece of work'. Few readers would disagree with this analysis. The impression is furthered by Conrad's reflections on his choice of title, 'Perhaps if I had published this tale … under the title of *First Command,* no suggestion of the supernatural would have been found in it' (6). He goes on to associate the actual title with 'the change from youth, carefree and fervent, to the more self-conscious and more poignant period of maturer life'. Its subtitle, however, *A Confession,* seems both a clear reference to Coleridge's Mariner, forever forced to repeat his story of contrition, as well as being an indication that the focus will be on the inner world of transformative growth as much as on nautical events. Readers continue to be conscious of the interplay of these elements, not finding in them the 'unlovely gap' that Conrad feared, but a rich experience, described by Colm Tóibín as 'a sense that reached beyond the time he described and beyond his characters' circumstances.' Tóibín picks up Conrad's own word 'beyond', but finds in it an aspect of Conrad's creative power, in which 'This idea of "beyond" satisfied something in his imagination.'[2]

The backdrop to Conrad's work on *The Shadow-Line* was the early part of the First World War. He dedicates the story to his son Borys, who was sent into action on the Somme, and also to 'all others who like himself have crossed in early youth the shadow-line of their generation'. This gives a sense of the seriousness of the matters with which he grapples in the narrative. The title suggests that there are many ways in which these young combatants are separated from those not directly involved in the conflict. As Jeffrey Myers says, the title refers to 'the indistinct twilight region between freedom and responsibility… action and reflection, life and death, between the naive self-confidence of the youthful captain and the self-reflective wisdom of his maturity' [3]—to which list we might add 'natural' and 'supernatural'.

As an epigram Conrad chooses the final words of Baudelaire's poem La Musique: 'D'autres fois, calme plat, grand miroir / De mon désespoir!' The poem compares the effect that music has upon the listener to the experience of being at sea, cradled 'sur l'immense gouffre', subject to all the possibilities of seafaring, not only the flat calm of despair, but also 'Le bon vent, la tempête et ses convulsions'. The quotation evokes the great becalming that the tale will describe, but is clearly used here as a metaphor for a state of mind, the 'désespoir' with which the poem concludes. The inner and the outer worlds come together, as the force of the elements mirrors the emotional upheaval suffered by the vessel of his being, 'Je sens vibrer en moi toutes les passions / D'un vaisseau qui souffre'. From the outset, this work combines inner and outer weather.

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[2] Colm Tóibín, 'The Heart of Conrad', (review of Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (375pp), The New York Review of Books vol LXV no3 (22/2/18) p.8

[3] Jeffrey Myers: 'Allusions and Meaning in Conrad's *The Shadow-Line*'. Style, vol.49, issue2, Summer 2015 p.149

Like *The Ancient Mariner,* the narrative recounts a story long completed, and the narrator's voice, a direct address, is conversational and intimate from the opening words: 'Only the young have such moments. I don't mean the very young. No.' (11) It is the voice of the subtitle's 'confession', the words of age to youth, of the older narrator to his youthful self, of an old sea dog to the next generation of sailors and perhaps of Conrad to his son's generation. The combined effect of this with the evocative title, the allusive epigram and the advertised comparison with *The Mariner*, prepare the reader to be on the alert for all those elements that might lie on either side of the shadow-line: the contrast between inactivity and action; the ways in which this might suggest innocence and experience; the very thin line that divides the living from the dead and, despite Conrad's protestations to the contrary, the relation between the worlds of the natural and the supernatural.

Other literary echoes suggest a deeper consciousness at work. *The Shadow-Line* has been described as 'a box of texts, as a textual collage made up of…bits of text and literary allusions.'[4] If it begins with Coleridge and Baudelaire, by the second paragraph the reader recognises that we should heed the lapsarian warning of an 'enchanted garden' whose 'very shades glow with promise', while 'every turn of the path has its seduction' (11). In the same paragraph we are told that we will be entering 'an undiscovered country', reminiscent of Hamlet's description of death, 'from whose bourne no traveller returns'. The ship's voyage parallels a journey through life, in which the traveller is wholly transformed by the passage. The young captain observes, even before he is appointed to his ship, that 'one perceives ahead a shadow-line, warning one' (11), and the novella, is his 'confession' of how he fared, and his realization of what lay waiting for him on the other side of that line. The question remains, however, why Conrad, a master storyteller in his own right, would choose to anchor his tale in these unmistakable links, thematic and linguistic, to works which have such clear supernatural elements, and at the same time to be so adamant that to explore anything beyond 'the visible and tangible world' would be against 'all [his] moral and intellectual being' (5). Reverberations from Coleridge's poem in particular become increasingly evident as the voyage progresses: its tempests, its becalmings and its potential supernatural agency.

The sea, its depth, its vastness, its unknowability, is where the literal and the metaphorical meet. Bertrand Russell discussed his reaction to Conrad's work —which '[bores] down into things to get to the very bottom below the apparent facts.' He is pleased to find that Conrad felt 'I had understood him'. He tells us that Conrad 'said he had grown to wish he could live on the surface and write differently, that he had grown frightened.'[5] The sense seems clear that there is a realm beyond the natural world which 'of which we are a self-conscious part' (5), the exploration of which must be undertaken by the individual alone, and that it is frightening. The young captain's first voyage of command is described as a 'test of manliness, of temperament, of courage and

[4] From <https://interestingliterature.com/2017/07/25/a-short-analysis-of-joseph-conrads-the-shadow-line/>
[5] Zdzislaw Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life'* Camden House (2007) pp.11-12.

fidelity—and of love' (38). This seems to make the journey unequivocally, as Tóibín says, an exploration of the 'beyond.' Like the Mariner in Coleridge's poem, the voyage will carry the seafarer 'Below the kirk, below the hill / Below the lighthouse top.' The word 'below' suggests the clear nautical fact of moving beyond the region visible from the land to the other side of the horizon's line. It also evokes the searching out of what lies under the 'apparent facts' after one has left behind all the navigation points, physical and spiritual, familiar to the person who remains in sight of land.

Conrad justifies his view that he has not written a tale to satisfy what Wordsworth called 'this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation', by differentiating between the supernatural as a palpable reality, and what might be experienced as 'the effect of a mental or moral shock on a common mind' (5). This he locates solely in the character of Mr Burns, the first mate, who 'in his diseased state turns into a mere superstitious fancy compounded of fear and animosity'. The reader's experience, however, is quite different. Long before the young captain meets his second in command there is an increasing sense of the inexplicable, of situations 'beyond the confines of the world' (6). Captain Giles seems at first sight to be 'anything but a seaman' (17), a land dweller, described by the young sailor as likely to contribute no more than 'a platitude or two'. It is not long, however, before we begin to suspect that there is more to him than first appears. He is just returned from 'a Sulu Sea trip' (17) himself and returning 'an expert', he is now 'supposed to know more about remote and uncharted parts of the Archipelago than any man living'.

Captain Giles sees the hero off on his voyage and welcomes him back on his return. He is identified by the appearance of 'his gorgeous gold chain' on which he pulls 'till at last the watch came up from the deep pocket like solid truths from a well' (28-29). Focus on the almost talismanic significance of Giles's watch, as well as his apparent guardianship of the voyage itself, hints at more than naturalistic power over the young captain's experiences at sea, including that of time itself. Once wholly separated from the logical certainties of the land, the young man finds himself unable to comprehend the forces to which he is subject. He ceases to feel the structure of time as he has known it, but feels 'the nights and the days wheel over us in succession, whether long or short, who can say? All sense of time is lost in the monotony of expectation, of hope and of desire' (78). And a glimpse of Captain Giles in the distance on his return to port is the first thing the young captain notices, 'I caught the glitter of the gold watch-chain across his chest ever so far away' (103). This restores him to a manageable experience of time's passage. We have no reason to suspect that, unlike Hamlet's father, he is not 'living', but he is 'credited with wonderful adventures' (19), 'possessed of a deeper philosophy' (19) and carries himself 'with an air of immense sagacity' (23). Giles has taught the young captain what Hamlet taught the naïve Horatio: 'there are more things in heaven and earth … than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.

Conrad's protagonist is impelled, almost against his will, to take up his major challenge by Captain Giles, who, despite his disarmingly prosaic

appearance, speaks in a 'low note of mystery' while he 'continued to gaze at me thoughtfully. Nothing could stop him.' (24). Coleridge's Wedding Guest has an experience not dissimilar when he is unexpectedly stopped and singled out—'That moment that his face I see, / I know the man that must hear me'—first held by the Mariner's 'skinny hand' and then 'with his glittering eye'. Hamlet too, is plucked out of his expected course of action by the appearance of his dead father, who similarly confronts the younger man, pressing him to an action he would not otherwise have taken. And it is to Hamlet alone that the older man would speak, 'as if it did some impartment desire / To you alone'. From the ghost's first appearance, Horatio suspects his motives, 'what if it tempt you toward the flood?' Like the seemingly more bodily Captain Giles and the mesmeric 'bright-eyed' Mariner, Hamlet cannot move away from the ghost, 'cannot choose but hear' as he finds the apparition of his father, 'hic et ubique'. All three young men are urged, beyond their own volition, to an experience that will separate them from the world they know, from their expected path, and lead them beyond a material reality.

At Giles' instigation, the young man finds himself rescued from the dullness of inactivity, from 'this stale unprofitable world of my discontent' (29) and the 'obscure feeling of life being but a waste of days' (25) and launched into what feels like a different world. He sees before him, not simply a voyage, exciting as that might be, but a way of undertaking the 'test' of his defining qualities and proving himself equal to the trials he encounters. This is not so very far removed from the course of action that Hamlet is set upon, in which he feels himself beset by the bleakness of his vision, 'How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!' He too leaves the innocence of his youth, not to find 'an enchanted garden', but one which is 'unweeded', 'That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely'. His responsibility to seek vengeance for his father is an act of filial love and duty, the validity of which he does not question, however little its enactment might be his natural course of action.

It is as the voyage is well under way that the echoes of *The Mariner* become more insistent. The newly appointed captain makes his journey to the vessel on which the main adventure, the 'test' anticipated, will take place, on an eerily described 'white, ghostly steamer' (42). He has been warned by the prescient Captain Giles to beware of the gulf of Siam, 'a funny piece of water.' Giles follows this enigmatic reflection with the warning, 'Don't let anything tempt you over. You'll find nothing but trouble there' (41). This turns out to be the exact position in which 'the chief mate…had buried his late captain' (49) and the point at which the ghost's malevolent presence is apparent, preventing, from beyond the grave, his young successor from sailing over the spot and out to open sea. The passage of this ship, like that of the Mariner, is subject to the agency of 'a lonesome spirit' which 'carries on the ship…but still requireth vengeance.'

We are approaching the half way point in the novella before the captain actually boards the vessel of his first command. He does not meet Burns, his

chief mate, until the third chapter begins, and already the tale is fraught with that sense of 'what was shimmering' just beneath the surface of appearance. As he enters his new cabin, the captain falls under the suspicion that there is more to his experiences than those elements that he can see or touch. He feels himself drawn without his knowledge into a long 'succession of men' (47) tied to the same fate as himself. The ship's previous captains 'each had left a little of himself' behind and 'as if a sort of composite soul, the soul of command had whispered suddenly to mine of long days at sea and of anxious moments'. Their influence is felt in the imagined voice that whispers to him with the prediction that 'you, too, shall taste of that peace and that unrest in a searching intimacy with your own self.' The test feels ultimate and carries the elemental force of 'all the winds and all the seas' which keep 'no reckoning of lives' (47).

The captain is shaken to be told by Burns that his dead predecessor died in the cabin, 'Just where you are sitting now' (49). He feels himself to be under 'an impulse of some sort; an effect of that force somewhere within our lives which shapes [us] this way or that' (27). Like Hamlet, who believes that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will', the captain feels himself to have been singled out for the events ahead. This is true too for the Wedding Guest, as it was for the Mariner himself before them all. There is little of Conrad's asserted confidence in the adequacy of 'the visible and tangible world' to explain his experiences when the captain recollects that 'even at sea a man could become the victim of evil spirits. I felt on my face the breath of unknown powers that shape our destinies' (54). It may well be no more than a 'breath', but it carries the force of 'evil' and has the capacity to change a man's fortunes utterly. There is more going on here than simply growing up.

The ship's consequent becalming, an event remembered from one of Conrad's own early voyages, is also a key episode in Coleridge's poem. Conrad's language holds together the disparate elements of Wordsworth's 'situation from common life' with 'a certain colouring of imagination': 'With her anchor at the bow and clothed in canvas to her very trucks, my command seemed to stand as motionless as a model ship set on the gleams and shadows of polished marble' (63). The technical terms are well balanced by the supernatural suggestion of that malign agency, in Conrad's description which is 'dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures', as outlined by Wordsworth in his preface as the ideal assimilation of the natural and the supernatural. The parallel with the Mariner's description is unmistakable, as his ship is trapped 'As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean'. Whether 'model' or 'painted', there is a suggestion that the kernel of the experience is revealed when the agency of either the creative reconstruction or the alchemical catalyst of recollection is applied to the immediate events. The young captain's memory casts the defining experiences into the embodied wisdom of parable or tale. The terms in which the story is told take us to the most familiar tropes of the storyteller's art. He feels he has 'abandoned [himself] to the … unexpected influences' (37) and found himself 'very much

like people in fairy tales', changed 'as if by enchantment'. The thought of his captaincy conjures up the ship, 'waiting for me, spellbound… like an enchanted princess'. He feels bound to her by destiny more than decision, 'indissolubly united for a certain portion of our future, to sink or swim together' (38). What belongs to the supernatural and what to a fairy tale would be difficult to distinguish here.

The weather in Conrad's as in Coleridge's text, has an ominous dimension as 'a great over-heated stillness enveloped the ship and seemed to hold her motionless in a flaming ambiance' (67). The elements seem hostile to human life, as if the captain had now entered the heated crucible of his 'test'. The Mariner's journey too places him where 'All in a hot and copper sky, / The bloody Sun at noon, / Right up above the mast did stand'. The contrasting conditions, storm, as opposed to calm, are equally reminiscent of each author's description. Conrad's hero recalls 'all the instances I had heard of topmasts being whipped out of a ship while there was not wind enough on her deck to blow out a match' (93). This seems to fly in the face of common sense, which would give us either storm or calm, but not both together. The Mariner similarly experiences the confusion of a sailing ship's movement without palpable wind, 'Without a breeze, without a tide, / She steadies with upright keel'. This signals the arrival of the sinister spectre bark with its fearsome crew.

The young captain has the same foreboding that the weather conditions are out of the visible order of nature. 'Not that the evil spell,' he says, 'held us always motionless. Mysterious currents drifted us here and there, with a stealthy power' (69). Conrad's choice of language suggests the very elements that he so determinedly denies. As the horrors of the calm finally come to an end, he describes the effect on their passage, noting that 'Two ridges of foam streamed from the ship's bows; the wind sang in a strenuous note' (99). It is hard not to call to mind a similar event in Coleridge's poem, when 'The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew / The furrow followed free'. The joyful freedom of motion following the imprisoning calm carries the same sense of release in both texts.

These lines speak of the relief of being re-located in the physical world. But if the Mariner's is a supernatural tale haunted by reality, Conrad's is of the natural that cannot free itself of the supernatural: 'I felt the inexpugnable strength of common sense being insidiously menaced by this gruesome, by this insane delusion' (68). Like the Mariner, his voyage has taken him beyond the familiar, prosaic landmarks of life ashore, beyond all the navigation points, on land, at sea, and in spirit, and have found themselves with nothing but themselves to guide them. Conrad's captain faces the challenge recognising 'a finality in the act committing me to the endless vigilance of my lonely task' (64); and speaking of the helmsman, the captain felt 'He was alone, I was alone, every man was alone where he stood' (90), so similar to the Mariner's sense of being 'Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide, wide sea'.

The storm after the calm educes further parallels between these texts. The young captain, despite his efforts, feels that the experience is 'like being

bewitched' (69). His rational mind disputes Mr Burns' certainty and he is determined that the prevailing conditions are simply part of the world's weather, but his assertion has the force of a man denying his own worst fears: 'But you cannot expect me to believe that a dead man has the power to put out of joint the meteorology of this part of the world' (69). Like Hamlet, he seems to feel that 'The time is out of joint' and both he and the captain feel the the 'cursed spite' of fate that they were born to set things right. Hamlet's words convey here his sense of destiny, the fear that there is no escape from a fate he has been 'born to', presumably waiting for him, foretold even before his own recognition of it.

If a shadow-line is what separates the known and the 'undiscovered country', then it is, as well as 'the twilight region between youth and maturity' (Myers 4), also the line between the living and the dead, as the dedication has suggested. In keeping with his view that 'the world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is', Conrad ascribes this difference to the effects of fever on the crew. The consequence of the contagion they have brought with them, however, is to render the sickened sailors almost indistinguishable from a host of the dead. Mr Burns is the character who most clearly inhabits this division. In his illness, the captain describes him as 'progressing towards the world of living men', with 'his frail and bony head' (69). The crew too seem to be hovering dangerously between the two states: 'The shadows swayed away from me without a word', the captain remembers. 'Those men were the ghosts of themselves, and their weight on a rope could be no more than the weight of a bunch of ghosts' (88). He, along with the cook, Ransome, were the only two on whom 'the fever-devil had not laid his hand' (83). The separation of these two from the rest of the crew parallels the Mariner and his fellows, all won at dice by the figures aboard the spectre bark. He watches as the dead 'all gan work the ropes, / Where they were wont to do: / They raised their limbs like lifeless tools—/We were a ghastly crew'. Like the Mariner, the single soul won by Life in Death rather than by Death itself, this young captain is wholly separated from the rest of the crew. He recalls his state, 'I stood amongst them like a tower of strength, impervious to disease and feeling only the sickness of my soul' (p88).

This sense of guilt, his 'sickness of … soul' is suffered acutely by both the captain and the Mariner during their voyages, the retelling of which by the much older self recalls the defining events of their lives. Their casting off from land brings them to a confrontation with the mettle of their souls when there is no longer any shelter to be found in custom or distraction - perhaps an experience shared by those who find themselves on the battlefield, like Borys and his generation. Conrad's hero sees the time prior to this test as 'infinitely remote… something on the other side of a shadow.' He recognises the fear he had always known, the question of how he would react under pressure. 'I always suspected that I might be no good,' he admits. 'And here is proof positive' (86). Like the Mariner, he had set out for adventure in a spirit of optimism. He remembers his arrival on board how 'putting my foot on her

deck for the first time, I received the feeling of deep physical satisfaction. Nothing could equal the fullness of that moment' (45). His setting sail could almost be described 'the ship was cheered, that harbour cleared' experienced by the Mariner, whose joy gives way all too soon to the horror of seeing his own worst nature written into the events that follow, and into his harrowed appearance: 'God save thee, ancient Mariner! / From the fiends that plague thee thus!' The Mariner admits the severity of his crime, 'For I had done an hellish thing'. Both seafarers could have looked back on their voyage and said, 'For the time was approaching for me to … prove my worth in the ultimate test' (44). The captain commits no crime, but is conscious of his unworthiness, and suffers guilt, even though, unlike the mariner, not linked to a particular act still he feels 'as if all my sins had found me out' (85).

Despair follows the recognition of guilt. Conrad's young hero longs for death as a respite from his suffering. He tells us how 'The quietness that came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation. It gave me a sort of comfort' (87). Among his lifeless crew, the Mariner laments 'And yet I could not die', yearning for the relief of death in his adversity. Hamlet too feels that death might be preferable to continued anguish and wishes 'that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! / Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter'. For all of them, the trials of crossing 'the shadow-line' seem almost beyond bearing; and one wonders whether any of the young men on the Somme might have considered death preferable to the torment of the trenches.

Conrad's tale ends at the point of departure, comparable to that of the Mariner, who can scarcely believe his eyes—'is this indeed / The lighthouse top I see? / Is this the hill? Is this the kirk?' The landmarks are reversed from his departure, as he passes them again on his return to the familiar world with its clear signposts. The Mariner has been changed by his experiences, however, and returns a very different person, much to the consternation of the Pilot, who 'shrieked / And fell down in a fit' at the sight of him. The young captain looks different to those he sees—'queer' (101). He too feels changed, 'a little strange, like a long lost wanderer among his kin' (62). Although only away a matter of days, he says, 'I feel old … All of you on shore look to me just like a lot of skittish youngsters that have never known a care in the world' (104). He is like the story telling Mariner, now 'ancient', who is never able to throw off the effects of his ordeal and tells us, 'I pass like night from land to land / I have strange power of speech'.

The circularity of the journey mirrors the circular nature of the telling. Within both tales there is a dislocation of time, with the Mariner pulling the Wedding Guest unwillingly into a re-enactment of past events, while the present moment of the wedding remains closed to him. Conrad's captain is clearly reliving past events, using the journal notes he kept at the time to point up the gulf of time that separates the youthful and the mature versions of himself. Even as the crisis concludes, he does not make the expected decision to cast the eerie events of the voyage into explicable naturalistic terms in the

light of his position as fully fledged captain back on dry land. He still describes events as if their only explanation is that he was subject to the struggle between opposing ghostly powers and remembers how 'by the exorcising virtue of Mr Burns's awful laugh, the malicious spectre had been laid, the evil spell broken, the curse removed. We were now in the hands of a kind and energetic Providence' (99).

Like the Mariner, the young captain is telling his own 'ghastly tale', and passing on from it the wisdom of experience that crossing the shadow-line has brought him. The price is high, even though, unlike Hamlet, the captain and the Mariner live to tell their tales. Conrad's captain has a sense that far more has happened than seems possible in the short time away. He finds that his adventure has become a thing of notoriety as 'our story had got about already in town'. Captain Giles wants to know more. 'What is it I hear?' (103) he asks. They have crossed into regions, like the young men on the Somme, the knowledge of which almost defies explanation. It frightens those they encounter, separates them from others, and gives them the knowledge that there is a region where 'God himself / Scarce seemed there to be'. The captain's story does not conclude with neat closure and a comfortable time ashore. He's drawn back to his ship. 'There's no rest for me until she's out in the Indian Ocean,' he tells Captain Giles, concluding with an unsettling, 'and not much of it even then.'(105) The captain's going back to sea is comparable to the mariner constantly re-telling his tale. Both tales echo the myths of the Flying Dutchman and the Wandering Jew. And there is pain and compulsion behind the inelutcable re-enacting of all these stories.[6]

Certainly all are 'wiser', after experiencing the events of the tale either directly or through the medium of listening to the mesmerising power of the narrator. But this comes at the cost of also being 'sadder', less able to feel a carefree confidence in the usual events of life, and destined to remain somehow outside 'the merry din' of the wedding feast. Both Conrad and Coleridge prepared for a second edition of their text by adding to the original, presumably partly in response to readers' initial reactions. Conrad's note clarifies his purpose and engages directly with critics' views. Coleridge adds the quotation from Thomas Burnet as well as his gloss. Like the epigram from Baudelaire, the quotation from Burnet's *Archaeologicae Philosophicae* is given without translation, which indicates the active challenge in which each author engaged his reader. While Conrad's note specifically denies any supernatural element to his tale, Coleridge suggests the opposite, 'I easily believe that the invisible natures in the universe are more in number than the visible. But who shall tell us all the kinds of them? The ranks and relationships, the peculiar qualities and gifts of each? what they do? where they dwell?' The succession of questions indicates an uncertainty in respect of relationship between the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible; and this uncertainty

[6] 'Always he [Conrad] gives the impression of one who tells a tale while subjected to drawn-out mental or physical pain. The tale, it seems, would not be told were not the need to tell it imperative, and the pain is a spur hastening the action'. (From 'The Tendency of English Fiction in 1917', Westminster Gazette, 4 August, 1917, p.7).

Conrad, despite himself, had in common with Coleridge. Conrad tries to limit the meaning of the apparently inexplicable to the effect of 'a mental or moral shock on a common mind', but conveys with surprising power what it is like to see beyond surface appearance. Coleridge advocates the importance of 'faithful adherence to the truth of nature', but understands the necessity of the author supplying 'the modifying colours of imagination', so that what is arrived at is a 'dramatic truth', 'awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom.'

Conrad wanted his tale to belong to the literal, the real, the natural. Coleridge was quite happy to begin with a half-remembered tale of a voyage from an old book, and add the fanciful, the imaginary, the supernatural. But starting out from almost opposing places, both authors meet on common ground, the adyta, as Coleridge put it, of human nature. And as T S Eliot suggested, every genuinely new work re-orders the previous whole. *The Ancient Mariner* and *The Shadow-Line* substantiate each other. Each gains from the opposing strength of the other. Believe in the real. Believe in the supernatural. These two works read together teach us how to believe in both. And both authors would, it seems, agree with Hamlet that a definitive philosophy is a form of limitation. In the words of Lloyd Alexander, twenty first century author of fantasy fiction, the direct descendant of the gothic and supernatural, 'Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It's a way of understanding it'.[7] Perhaps more simply and closer to home, the wisdom of Albus Dumbledore points us in the right direction, as he answers Harry Potter's similar question during a near death experience at the end of *The Deathly Hallows*. "Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?" "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

[7] 'A Visit with Lloyd Alexander' interview 1994 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wt9ZHQy2wAk&feature=share