How big was the Albatross?

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WHEN I FIRST WORKED on Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, some sixty years ago, the field was still dominated by John Livingston Lowes, a writer strongly imbued with imagist ideas. Lowes regarded Coleridge primarily as a great imagist poet who had read texts primarily for the vivid images he could pick up from them, store in his imagination and later reproduce—with value added, so to speak—in even greater poems. In his study, *The Road to Xanadu*, he traced many of Coleridge's words and phrases to sources in the travel books he delighted in. At the time of my own interest, however, scholars such as Robert Penn Warren and Humphry House, who had become equally prominent, had shown interest in such things as the sun and moon imagery in poems such as *The Ancient Mariner*; and what they might signify—which took Lowes's ideas in a rather different direction. As I began my own research on Coleridge's reading in the 1790s and before, I shared something of their interest, since, following them, I was struck by how much writing in Coleridge and his predecessors, whether or not devoted to travel, had displayed not only to an eye for vividness but a search for the significance of particular images. In particular, eighteenth-century mythologists had been intrigued by the Egyptians' fondness for a design embodying the hieroglyph of the sun, serpent and wings, with serpentine energies proceeding from the sun and wings projecting from its main body—a design which also fascinated Blake. Projecting this large and complex design on to the original Ark, they believed that it might be expressed either as serpentine energies alone or as Cneph, the winged, good daemon, the guardian genius, 'who with his expanded wings hovered over the waters' and 'was therefore the proper pilot of that vessel'. This complex of ideas struck me as providing a fine paradigm for *The Ancient Mariner*, with its ship in relationship to the sun and moon, the destruction of the winged creature that had attached itself to it and the Ancient Mariner's subsequent release through his delight in the serpentine energies displayed by the water snakes in the sea around the boat. This basic pattern, I came to think, was one that had continued to haunt Coleridge for the rest of his life, along with many other concerns, and I thought of it, and continue to think of it, as providing the most satisfying explanation that had been proposed for the poem's pattern of events. When I was asked to produce a collection of Coleridge's poems for Everyman a few years later, also, I noted with some pleasure that whoever had designed the dust jacket had evidently taken some of these ideas on board, depicting the Ancient Mariner at the centre of his ship, with a large white albatross shackled to him at his feet, while ropes hung across the rigging like great serpents.

There was one aspect of the poem which I had not thought about, however, and which did not seem particularly important at the time. The question I had not asked was, how large did Coleridge think his albatross actually was? The general assumption, including my own, was that it was very large indeed—a

point that was lightly touched upon when I heard William Empson talking about the 'biscuit-worms' that the mariners fed to the bird—which, he pointed out, must have set up an intriguing game of skill for a 'great hulking albatross'. Coleridge himself probably came to see that rather tricky questions of the kind were liable to be provoked, since he cut out mention of the biscuit worms in later editions, and replaced them with the words 'It ate the food it ne'er had ate'. Other questions, however, still remained unanswered—notably the lines 'Instead of the Cross, the Albatross|About my neck was hung.'—where one was at first tempted to think that it must have been a smaller bird that was being described. And that possibility I then found to be exacerbated by an entry in the Notebooks, where Coleridge, travelling to Malta on shipboard, wrote

> Saw, a nice black faced bright black-eyed white-toothed Boy running up to the Main Top with a large Leg of Mutton swung, Albatross-fashion about his neck/[1]

That was a very different visualization of the albatross—indeed, I found myself driven to ask whether there was in fact *any* point in the poem that forced one to think that the albatross had been such an enormous bird. There was in fact, I found, only one point where the size of the bird was mentioned at all, and that had not appeared until some years after the first printing, when Coleridge added a gloss to the poem. There he wrote,

> Till a great sea-bird, called the Albatross, came through the sea-fog…

Apart from that, there was nothing to indicate that the albatross was anything but a rather small bird. So I was driven on to ask where—at least in the earlier years—had the idea come from that the albatross was so very large? And the answer I eventually reached was that it had come not from Coleridge at all, but from Wordsworth. It was Wordsworth who, in a note dictated to Miss Fenwick in 1843, recalled the occasion, many years before, when he and Coleridge had planned the poem:

> I had been reading in Shelvocke's Voyages, a day or two before, that while doubling Cape Horn, they frequently saw albatrosses in that latitude, the largest sort of sea-fowl, some extending their wings twelve or thirteen feet. 'Suppose,' said I, 'you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary Spirits of those regions take upon them to avenge the crime.'

Livingston Lowes, as you might expect, since he was looking into the origins of the poem, went to the trouble of consulting Shelvocke's *Voyages* for himself and found that Wordsworth had remembered the first passage very

[1] CN II 1997.

accurately—indeed so accurately, since the words in the original read 'the largest sort of sea-fowl, some of them extending their wings 12 or 13 feet', that he suspected that when he dictated his note to Miss Fenwick he had probably been refreshing his memory from the copy of Shelvocke itself, which was still on the shelves at Rydal Mount. But however that may be, it must be pointed out that the passage from Shelvocke, describing the enormous wingspan of the albatrosses, occurred some dozen pages *before* the passage that Lowes regarded as having given rise to the account of the Mariner's crime, where it is stated that south of 'le Mair' they had not seen one sea-bird,

> … except a disconsolate black *Albitross, who* accompanied us for several days, hovering about as if he had lost himself, till *Hatley*, (my second Captain) observing… that this bird was always hovering near us, imagin'd, from his colour, that it might be some ill omen.

After some fruitless attempts, this account continues, Hatley 'shot the Albitross, not doubting (perhaps) that we should have a fair wind after it'.[2]

Livingston Lowes, having also quoted from this passage, went on to assert that the 'disconsolate black albatross' shot by Hatley must have been of the kind known as the 'sooty albatross', which is smaller in size and which, he maintained (from experiments, he claimed, of his own), could be carried suspended from a sailor's neck.

What is surprising, however, is that in spite of having quoted this passage Lowes said that he did not believe that the albatross Hatley killed should be identified with the one described in the poem. Presumably, he trusted Wordsworth's memory of the large albatrosses, as described earlier in Shelvocke, rather than the subsequent account of the shooting of the 'disconsolate black albitross', which, as I say, appeared several pages later.[3] He must also have assumed that when Coleridge was constructing the later gloss he allowed himself to be attracted by Wordsworth's memory into describing the albatross of his poem not only as a 'great sea-bird' but as an enormous one—even if that, perhaps, was not quite how he would have remembered his original conception. Lowes thought that poets should be allowed some licence and presumably found it rather tiresome of readers to go on being worried about the size of this bird, feeling that their attitude should be rather more casual: he went on to quote Lewis Carroll's lines in *Sylvie and Bruno*:

> He thought he saw an Albatross
> That fluttered round the lamp;
> He looked again, and found it was

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[2] De Quincey, coming across the passage in 1810, thought it must have been 'the germ of the *Ancient Mariner*'. He claims that he questioned Coleridge, who denied a debt to Shelvocke; this surprised Wordsworth, who said that the derivation of the hint for the action from the passage cited was 'notorious'. Wordsworth later told Alexander Dyce, however, that Coleridge 'probably never saw Shelvocke'. Lowes, in turn, doubted this last assertion in view of other correspondences between the two texts.

[3] He would not have known about the entry in Coleridge's notebook, of course.

A Penny-Postage-Stamp.
'You'd best be getting home,' he said,
'The nights are very damp!'

Lowes evidently thought that questions about the size of Coleridge's albatross really belonged to a higher form of nonsense, rather as in Lewis Carroll's poetry.

In spite of this, however, people at the time still found the matter one for comment. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, visiting England, recorded his bemusement on going to the ornithological collection in Warwick and seeing an albatross, which, he declared, was '… huge beyond imagination'. He went on,

> I do not think Coleridge could have known the size of the fowl when he caused it to be hung round the neck of his Ancient Mariner.[4]

So Hawthorne must have been assuming till then that Coleridge had been describing a smaller bird, and probably did not even ask himself what colour it was. After this, however, writers who had discovered more about albatrosses knew that they were often quite big, so that from now on, the albatross was commonly described as very large, and frequently pictured as white. Baudelaire, for instance, writes in his *Fleurs du Mal* of them as 'vastes oiseaux des mers', with great white wings. For New England writers, who had actually seen such birds, the albatross became an image of the transcendental: D. H. Lawrence wrote that the best Americans were 'mystics by instinct' and said that R. H. Dana was a good example: '… his own soul is as the albatross. It is a storm-bird. And so is Dana.' He quoted Dana's own words:

> One of the finest sights that I have ever seen was an albatross asleep on the water, off Cape Horn we saw the fellow, all white, directly ahead of us, asleep on the waves, with his head under his wing; now rising upon the top of a huge billow, and then falling slowly until he was lost in the hollow between.

Going on to write about Herman Melville, Lawrence found him more complicated than Dana, a twofold figure who combined 'the ostensible Melville, a sort of Emersonian transcendentalist', and 'the underneath Melville, a sort of strange underworld, undersea Yankee creature looking with curious, lurid vision on the upper world.'[5] Yet he thought that *Moby Dick* was the record of a 'wonderful, wonderful voyage. And a beauty that is so surpassing only because of the author's awful flounderings in mystical waters. He wanted to get metaphysically deep. And he got deeper than metaphysics. It is a surpassingly beautiful book, with an awful meaning, and bad jolts.' He continued, 'It is interesting to compare Melville with Dana, about the

[4] *English Notebooks*
[5] SM 237.

albatross—Melville a bit sententious'.

> I remember the first albatross I ever saw. It was during a prolonged gale in waters hard upon the Antarctic seas. From my fore-noon watch below I ascended to the overcrowded deck, and there lashed upon the main hatches, I saw a regal feathered thing of unspotted whiteness, and with a hooked Roman bill sublime. At intervals it arched forth its vast, archangel wings—wondrous throbbings and flutterings shook it. Though bodily unharmed, it uttered cries, as some King's ghost in supernatural distress. Through its inexpressible strange eyes methought I peeped to secrets which took hold of God. As Abraham before the angels, I bowed myself; the white thing was so white, its wings so wide, and in those for ever exiled waters, I had lost the miserable warping memories of traditions and of towns. Long I gazed at that prodigy of plumage.

Melville goes on to say that the first name for the bird that he heard was 'goney'. Indeed at that time he had never read Coleridge's poem, nor had he even heard the word 'albatross'; he asserted nevertheless, that in the 'wondrous bodily whiteness of the bird' chiefly lurked 'the secret of the spell'—'a truth the more evinced in this, that by solecism of terms there are birds called grey albatrosses; and these I have frequently seen, but never with such emotions as when I beheld the Antarctic fowl.'

Melville also had to confess that the first albatross he saw had been caught with hook and line, and that the captain had then made a postman of it by attaching a missive to it. Lawrence, too, pointed out that Melville's albatross had been 'a prisoner, caught by a bait on a hook'. He continued,

> Well, I have seen an albatross, too: following us in waters hard upon the Antarctic, too, south of Australia. And in the Southern winter. And the ship, a P. and O. boat, nearly empty. And the lascar crew shivering.
>
> The bird with its long, long wings following, then leaving us. No one knows till they have tried, how lost, how lonely those Southern waters are. And glimpses of the Australian coast.
>
> It makes one feel that our day is only a day. That in the dark of the night ahead other days stir fecund, when we have lapsed from existence.
>
> Who knows how utterly we shall lapse.

But Melville, Lawrence insists, has to keep up his disquisition about 'whiteness'. 'The great abstract fascinated him. The abstract where we end, and cease to be. White or black. Our white, abstract end!' He also argues that Melville has to sum up his observations by devoting a whole chapter to 'The

whiteness of the white whale', bringing Moby Dick back into the picture and stressing his role as central to his major theme. Though the whale was notable as one of the few warm-blooded creatures in the sea, what Melville had made it symbolize, according to Lawrence, was its pure whiteness, which had come to be seen as abstract—and indeed, since such abstractness signified death it logically followed that death itself should become Melville's ultimate theme. But if one follows the reasoning of the present essay, both Melville and Lawrence were mistaken in thinking that Coleridge's albatross had been a great white bird, and in linking it on to the whiteness of the great white whale and making both of them great images of transcendence that needed to be destroyed.

Lawrence, as we know, was more interested in life than in death, so that although he was intrigued by the descriptions of albatrosses by Dana and Melville, he found, when he looked for an image of his own remembering, not an albatross shot by a mariner but a snake that once visited him at a nearby watering spot in Sicily on a hot summer's day. The poem he wrote is familiar enough to most readers: how when the snake began to disappear into the dark hole nearby, Lawrence found himself listening to the voices of his education, reminding him that 'in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous': whereupon he picked up a log and threw it at him. He thought he probably did not hit the snake,

> But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in undignified haste,
> Writhed like lightning and was gone
> Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
> At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.
>
> And immediately I regretted it.
> I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
> I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.
>
> And I thought of the albatross,
> And I wished he would come back, my snake.

How large Lawrence thought the albatross had been we cannot, of course, possibly know now.[6] Probably the voices of his education, accursed or otherwise, would have made him think of it as the very large white bird that nineteenth-century English and American writers had increasingly envisaged. The evidence presented here, however, suggests that when Coleridge first wrote his poem he was thinking of his bird much more, as Lawrence might have done, as an example of the small forms of life that human beings do not attend to with sufficient seriousness—even if he was later seduced by more conventional writers such as Wordsworth into feeling that it should be

[6] Exactly when he first read Coleridge is not clear. Jessie Chambers recalls his reading *Christabel* in a visit to Beauvale Abbey (*Personal Record*, p. 115) but this may well not have been his first acquaintance with the poet's work.

made to loom more largely in the reader's imagination.

But at the same time, this need not be the end of the story. When Livingston Lowes looked for other detailed evidence concerning the genesis of the poem as a whole, he was particularly struck by some accounts of luminous appearances in the sea, as in Captain James Cook's account of his *Voyages*—which, in view of a comment of Coleridge's elsewhere,[7] we know that he read. At one point Cook wrote of being becalmed in a sea 'covered with a kind of slime', in which there were small sea animals displaying various tints of blue, red and (under candle-light) burnished gloss, with, in the dark, a faint appearance of glowing fire. These words--which Lowes plausibly thought must have assisted with the generation of the lines about the water-snakes—were followed immediately by an account of two birds which settled near the ship, one of which was 'little more than half the size of the other' and 'seemed to be of the albatross kind… upon the whole, not unlike the sea-gull, though larger'. On the evidence we have been examining, Coleridge himself would have known, like Cook, that albatrosses were of various sizes and assumed that one like the one killed by Hatley must have been small, of the 'sooty albatross' variety. So that the smaller size presupposed in Shelvocke's account of the killing, or the one in Cook's ('like a sea-gull, though larger') is likely to have been true also of the one that he made his Ancient Mariner kill, and which was then hung around his neck as a sign of what he had done--sizable, in other words, but nothing like the 'wandering albatrosses', with wing spans of twelve or thirteen feet, that Wordsworth had been reading about in Shelvocke. Yet those birds haunted the end of the poem, since the tale as a whole was one of how the shooting of a small, sociable bird was first followed by unbearable destructive suffering, but then, when the full nature of life was discovered and appreciated, was replaced by the operation of the good genius, which could take charge of the ship and guide it back to its native country, where all things could be newly understood, So in the end Cneph, the good genius, could become the true spirit of the boat and take on the symbolic form of the mighty albatross that from now on would be mistakenly seen as having been its form ever since the outset of the tale.

Or, if you prefer to see it so, Wordsworth himself, still remaining impressed, continued to read the poem rather differently; and it was his view, and his account of how the two poets had discussed it, that made way for the composite interpretation adopted by later readers.

[S] See John Sterling's *Essays and Tales*, (London 1848,) I, p. xx .