"Such redemption as is possible in this world." Sleep and Prayer in 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'.

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1. Introduction:

The poem as a morally educative text which establishes the primacy of ethics for consciousness

In this paper, I hope, by taking some central ideas from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, especially from his early work *Existence and Existents*, to suggest ways in which "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere"[1] can be reclaimed as a morally educative text. I ask for your patience as listeners to what I fear may sometimes seem an opaque discussion: sleep and unconsciousness however will be important to my argument as they are important in Levinas's philosophy and, I contend, important in Coleridge's poem. So if you do find yourself nodding off I will just understand that you wanted to put one important strand in my argument to the test.

The framework for my discussion is Levinas's conception of the nature of consciousness. Crucial to this conception are four ideas: first, the notion of pure being, being without subjectivity, mere existence, the anonymous being of the night, with its looming, insubstantial presence—what Levinas calls the *il y a* or the 'there is'; second, the notion of consciousness as an interval or refuge in the being of the night, a 'here' posited against the anonymous, rustling swarm of the 'there is'. It is in sleep that Levinas suggests that existence limits itself to a place and the private ego finds its base; third, awakening from this base, the ego is able to enjoy its being-in-the-world, the world which is intention and light, in which one desires sincerely what satisfies one; and, fourth, there is consciousness's encounter with the other, which, Levinas claims, provides consciousness with the only possibility of transcending the solitude of the ego, as it provides 'the event of the most radical breakup of the very categories of the ego, for it is for me to be somewhere else than my self; it is to be pardoned, to not be a definite existence.'[2] By thinking through these four notions:

- the il y a or the 'there is'
- the auto-positing of consciousness in sleep
- the ego's definitive being-in-the-world and
- the ethical priority of consciousness's encounter with the other

In a reading of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" I hope to establish a way towards reclaiming the poem as a morally coherent and powerfully ethical text.

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[1] This paper was originally a contribution to the Friends of Coleridge Study Weekend: 1798: The Ancient Mariner and Peter Bell; held at Halsway Manor, 11th – 13th September 2015. The text of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" referred to throughout this discussion is therefore the 1798 version as published in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano. (New York and London: Norton 2004).

[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2001 edition) pp.85-86.

I take the following three suggestions to be the principal objections to considering "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" as a morally coherent text:

1. The Ancyent Marinere's crime is not a crime.
2. The crew, the bystanders, suffer much more than the Marinere himself as a result of his crime.
3. The explicit moral that the Marinere draws from his experience is woefully inadequate as a response to what he has witnessed and experienced.

Using some of Levinas's ideas to interpret the poem one might counter these objections. The first objection that the Marinere's transgression is slight might be answered by the observation that if such an apparently small misdemeanour has such severe consequences then the way is open to appreciate what Levinas terms the infinity of the ethical relation.

Regarding the position of the crew, I think their suffering, that follows the Marinere's killing of the albatross, adds to the poem's difficulty as a morally educative text, but also adds to its subtlety. There is a debate to be had as to whether the crew or the Marinere face the more punishing predicament: the Marinere is spared death only to have his existence granted as a prize in a dice game to the figure Coleridge identified in later versions of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" as life-in-death. But even without settling whether the Marinere at the height of his torment might justifiably envy the dead crew, one can read the poem as insisting that no ethical outlook can deliver its adherents from uncertainty: motives may be as inscrutable as the impulse that led the Marinere to shoot the albatross in the first place; and the consequences of any act of transgression, like the shooting of the albatross, or any act of inclusive generosity, like the blessing of the watersnakes, cannot be judged right or wrong without some uncertain allowance being made for the vicissitudes of bad luck, and accident. The path of goodness, in other words, is not always clear and does not always lead to a happy destination—or at least, it is not a path that can always be traversed without trouble or defeat. A commitment to goodness will not spare us loss and will very likely lead us into a guilty recognition of the suffering and destruction we are responsible for. The representation of the crew may be read as illuminating some of the key aspects of Levinas's account of the ethical predicament of consciousness. And the crew's fate is a reminder that even a man growing in moral insight and fortitude, as I take the Marinere to be, in spite of a recognition of his ethical responsibility towards the other, will not be spared experiences of profound horror.

The third objection to the idea that the poem is morally coherent—the suggestion that the final conclusion of the Marinere's tale advocating the need for communal prayer and a love for God's creatures is pointedly simple-minded—may be understood in terms of the Levinasian opposition between 'the saying and the said': the lived experience that yields the moral, the tale of horror the Marinere draws from his experience, cannot be distilled in a law or a

rule of conduct. The inadequacy of the moral emphasises that one's ethical responsibility towards the other can never be fully comprehended, or finally stated, or easily expressed or concisely defined.

A Levinasian reading of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" rests with the contention that taking an ethical stance towards the other is fundamental to being human, honouring, as Simon Critchely puts it, the 'Biblical wisdom of unconditional respect for the other human being'[3], and, as the Marinere might wish to add: extending that respect to the alterity or otherness of all living beings.

The Marinere discovers that if we betray our ethical calling we betray our humanity. But also that our humanity may be reconstituted in a renewal of one's respect for the infinite responsibility that defines our face-to-face relation with the other.

2. The ethical does not end—Scintillation:

The poem's narrative consists of an unsettled, unresting alternation between anguish and release.

The traditional account of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" as a morally educative text views it as a Christian narrative of a fall, followed by a period of exile, which leads to a moment of conversion, that heralds a final redemption. C.M.Bowra offers a succinct statement of this position:

> The poem is a myth of a guilty soul and marks in clear stages the passage from crime through punishment to such redemption as is possible in this world.[4]

The problem with this account is that the Marinere's redemption is never complete and there is no moment when he is finally and permanently free of anguish and guilt. There is never a moment when his punishment seems entirely done: he 'penance more will do', one must presume, even after his encounter with the Wedding Guest. The unending nature of the Marinere's moral struggle, though not marked by unrelieved suffering and guilt, gives striking resonance to Bowra's phrase 'such redemption as is possible in this world'.

The poem offers a grand, haunted, sublime, fantastic representation of deep suffering, great beauty, the gift of feeling 'welcomed' by the world, and the terrible loss of that feeling with the onset of an anguish and agony which threatens to be all consuming, and then, the continual rediscovery of the power of prayer, of story-telling, of conversation to regain the 'joy' of a tranquil accommodation of otherness that is temporarily free of anguish.

The poem represents a continual, never settled interchange of hope and despair: it begins with the optimism of the Marinere as he sets out on his

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[3] Simon Critchley Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. Edited by Simon Critchely and Robert Bernasconi. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002) p.26.

[4] C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1949). Quoted in *The Annotated Ancient Mariner*. Edited by Martin Gardner. (New York: Prometheus Books 2003). p.183

voyage, and the checking of this optimism in the obstructing ice field, then the happy appearance of the albatross gives way to the terrible fact of the Marinere's crime, and so on, as this loss of hope is succeeded by an escape from despair in the welcome return of hope, until the Marinere confronts the dreadful anguish of hope sinking again.

This fast alternation between hope and despair might be visualised as a flashing or glimmering light. Levinas points out that 'the way light is produced' is 'as a scintillation'[5]. Light sparkles. Levinas argues that consciousness is like this: it is a 'fainting away' into unconsciousness at the 'focal point' of its luminousness. Effort tires us: 'consciousness can… begin or end in a head, light up or be extinguished, and escape itself: the head falls on the shoulders; one sleeps'.[6]

Light flashing, or glittering, or glimmering, is, of course, a signature image in "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere". Its associations are various, and contrary. The Wedding Guest is entranced by the light in the Marinere's eye and so feels compelled to listen to his tale:

> He holds him with his glittering eye--
> The wedding guest stood still
> And listens like a three year's child;
> The Marinere hath his will. (17-20)

This 'glittering' is hypnotic and overpowering. The albatross's living presence has beauty conferred upon it by the touching delicacy of the moonlight:

> In mist or cloud on mast or shroud
> It perch'd for vespers nine,
> Whiles all the night thro' fog-smoke white
> Glimmer'd the white moon-shine. (73-76)

A quality of brilliant sparkling light is particularly foregrounded when the Marinere's heart opens to the beauty of the watersnakes:

> Beyond the shadow of the ship
> I watch'd 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. (264-273)

However, the figure of 'glittering' acquires horrifying connotations when the

[5] *Existence and Existents.* p.65
[6] *Existence and Existents.* p.66

Marinere confronts the accusing eyes of the gang of animated corpses that man the ship after his fellow sailors have died:

> All stood together on the deck,
> For a charnel-dungeon fitter:
> All fix'd on me their stony eyes
> That in the moon did glitter. (lines 439-442)

The 'curse' in the dead men's eye is intensified by its 'glittering' and the hypnotic power of the dead men's eyes might put us in mind of the Wedding Guest's anxiety as he listens to the Marinere's tale: 'I fear thy glittering eye'. So details of great beauty and of unsettling threat are similarly granted pressing emphasis by the scintillating light that pervades the poem.

The alternation of anguish and release, hope and despair in "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" is a kind of scintillation—hope flickers and flares against a darkness that sometimes engulfs it. This back and forth, now up, now down, begins in the poem, informs the Marinere's tale even before the shooting of the albatross. The albatross first appears when the ship is disturbingly trapped in beautiful ice and, the first consequence of the shooting of the albatross seems not to affect the rising of 'a good south wind' and release from this ice. Anguish does not immediately follow the Marinere's crime.

And the anguish which does eventually follow the shooting of the albatross is not unrelieved. The Marinere experiences anguish as a result of the ship's motionlessness, he faces the torment of a raging thirst encompassed by an ocean of undrinkable water. The ship's motionlessness confounds its very purpose, making it 'as idle as a painted ship/ Upon a painted ocean'.

The appearance of the spectre-ship repeats this pattern of upsurging hope which gives way to a horrifying despair. The ship's appearance on the horizon raises the possibility of rescue and this hope is intensified as it nears the Marinere's ship and takes a more certain form. The Marinere announces its presence, freeing his dry mouth to cry out by sucking his own blood:

> A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist!
> And still it ner'd and ner'd;
> And, an it dodg'd a water-sprite,
> It plung'd and tack'd and veer'd.
>
> With throat unslack'd, with black lips bak'd
> Ne could we laugh, ne wail:
> Then while thro' drouth all dumb they stood
> I bit my arm and suck'd the blood
> And cry'd, A sail! a sail!
>
> With throat unslack'd, with black lips bak'd
> Agape they hear'd me call:
> Gramercy! they for joy did grin
> And all at once their breath drew in

As they were drinking all. (145-158)

But this joy is short-lived. The Marinere realises almost as soon as he has cried out, that his hope was horribly ill-founded.

3. The crew represent three aspects of Levinas's analysis of consciousness:
   a. *The collective 'we' of being-in-the-world.*
   b. *The ethical concern for the albatross—the Marineres's 'hollo' and their feeding of the bird.*
   c. *Their embodiment, as spectres, of the 'no exit' from existence.*

A consideration of the representation of the crew in the poem can serve as a good basis for further elucidating my understanding of Levinas's analysis of consciousness. The crew, when simple living presences at the beginning of the Marinere's tale, are untroubling companions for the Marinere. Initially they illustrate Levinas's notion of being-in-the-world as the Marinere identifies with his fellow sailors as part of a collective 'we'. Before the encounter with the albatross, at the beginning of his description of the voyage the Marinere emphasises the shared happiness of the ship's setting sail:

The Ship was cheer'd, the Harbour clear'd—
Merrily did we drop (25-26)

And he identifies a similar collective outlook in the face of adversity when the ship reaches the ice of Antarctica:

And thro' the drifts the snowy clifts
Did send a dismal sheen;
Ne shapes of men ne beasts we ken—
The Ice was all between. (53-56)

The Marinere identifies himself as part of the crew and his use of the first person plural "we" can be linked to Levinas's notion of 'social life in the world' being 'communication'. Levinas writes:

> It is through participation in something in common, in an idea, a common interest, a work, a meal, in "a third man" that contact is made. Persons are not simply in front of one another; they are along with each other around something. A neighbour is an accomplice.[7]

So, the sailors form a crew, working together on the ship, facing the challenge and the frustration of the ice together, with each other and with the Marinere. However, this 'common interest', precisely because it is shared, is not in Levinas's terms, ethical. For Levinas, as Jill Robbins explains, writing about the importance of prayer in Levinas's thought, the ethical relation to the other is founded on a recognition that the other must be honoured in its otherness. Being-in-the-world, that celebrates the shared triumph of the beginning of the

[7] *Existence and Existents* p.32

voyage, or registers the mutual concern of the sailors confronted by the all-encompassing ice, stays confined within the ego's concern for its own being and so does not go beyond the solitude of the ego.

The sailors' response to the albatross may be viewed differently. Here the sailors act ethically. For Levinas, as Jill Robbins says in her summary of Levinas's argument in *Totality and Infinity*:

… language, along with generosity, is the sole exception to the habitual economy that returns all alterity to the Self-Same.[8]

This 'habitual economy' is of central concern to consciousness in the world. Consciousness seeks to make the things of the world serve its purposes and reduce what is other to an extension of itself. However, ethics is founded on a fundamental respect for the otherness of the other. And the ethical relation can be understood from contemplating the character of certain kinds of language. "Ethics happens in and as language".[9] However, ethical language is not of the order of knowledge; as Robbins summarises:

> In the ethical relation to the other in language, the fact of speaking is more important than any word or content.[10]

And:

> Ethical language is interlocutionary and interpellative: it never speaks about the other but only to him or her.[11]

Hence, the importance for Levinas, of saying, 'Hello'. Robbins quotes a 1986 interview with Levinas in which he says:

> Is not the first word *bonjour*? As simple as *bonjour*! *Bonjour* as benediction and my being available for the other. It doesn't mean: what a beautiful day. Rather: I wish you peace. I wish you a good day. Expression of one who worries about the other. [12]

One might stress the implications in Levinas's observation here by saying that prayer offers a way of saying hello to the other. Thus, in Coleridge's beautiful sketch of the crew's response to the arrival of the albatross, the basis of the ethical in Levinas's thought comes into view:

> At length did cross an Albatross,
> Thorough the Fog it came;
> And an it were a Christian Soul,
> We hail'd it in God's name.
>
> The Marineres gave it biscuit-worms,

[8] Jill Robbins, 'Who prays? Levinas on Irremissible Responsibilty' in *The Phenomenology of Prayer.* Edited by Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba. (New York: Fordham University Press) p.32
[9] Ibid
[10] 'Who prays?' p.33
[11] 'Who prays?' p.32
[12] Quoted 'Who prays?' p.33

And round and round it flew:
The Ice did split with a Thunder-fit;
The Helmsman steer'd us thro'.

And a good south wind sprung up behind,
The Albatross did follow;
And every day for food or play
Came to the Marinere's hollo! (61-72)

By hailing the bird and offering it food the crew honour the bird's alterity: it is free of them, other than them, but they recognise, in their greeting and their gift, a responsibility towards it.

The Marinere's confession of his killing of the albatross is made immediately after his description of the crew's generosity towards the bird. Moreover, the Wedding Guest's prayer-like declaration of concern for the Marinere at the moment of his confession serves as a further emphatic ethical contrast to the stark destructiveness of the Marinere's act:

"God save thee, ancyent Marinere!
"From the fiends that plague thee thus--
"Why look'st thou so?"--with my cross bow
I shot the Albatross. (77-80)

The crew's response to the killing of the albatross is initially condemnatory:

And I had done an hellish thing
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird
That made the Breeze to blow. (89-92)

But this condemnation is quickly revised with the rising of the sun and so the crew betray their earlier respect for the bird:

Ne dim ne red, like God's own head,
The glorious Sun uprist:
Then all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird
That brought the fog and mist.
'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay
That bring the fog and mist. (90-98)

Though the crew change their verdict almost immediately—their condemnation gives way to congratulation—the basis of the crew's judgement remains constant. The ethical responsibility the crew displayed in their generosity to the albatross gives way to a re-assertion of their egoistic concern for their own being. The albatross's otherness is denied as it is identified as a representative of a class, it is one of many 'such birds' and its significance for the crew now is as an influence on the weather. The Marinere is to be exonerated because the progress of the ship does not seem to have been hindered by the albatross's death. However, the crew's confidence gives way to anguish as the wind fails

and the ship comes to a terrible halt.

At this point it seems wrong to claim that the Marinere suffers less than his fellow sailors. Like the rest of the crew, the Marinere shares the distress of being wracked by thirst.

> And every tongue thro' utter drouth
> Was wither'd at the root;
> We could not speak no more than if
> We had been choked with soot.

The crew die filled with resentment towards the Marinere, with a curse in their eyes. But beyond this indignation, their deaths are not marked by distress and happen quickly. They die preoccupied with their judgement against the Marinere.

To lament or express indignation at the horrible fate of the crew—to denounce the crew's fate as an injustice—might be to presume that the Marinere's fate is happier than theirs. The Marinere, though, cannot be spared their fate as he too must die. In Coleridgean terms, one might suppose 'life-in-death', despite her glee at winning the dice game, must give way to death at the end. In this light, the Marinere's fate may be viewed as being worse than his fellow sailors', for before he dies he must endure a life-in-death.

So when the Marinere reassures the Wedding Guest that 'this body dropped not down' this is very slight reassurance. It is the reassurance of the 'so far', in Homer Simpson's correction of Bart's 'this is the worst day of my life', when he chooses to add: 'This is the worst day of your life, so far'. Or, more seriously, it is like Edgar's 'the worst is not/So long as we can say, 'This is the worst'. 'My body dropped not down—*yet'.*

What the Marinere is condemned to experience is horror. Levinas writes,

> In horror a subject is stripped of his subjectivity, of his power to have private existence. The subject is depersonalised. … horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua *entity,* inside out. It is a participation in the *there is,* in the *there is* which returns in the heart of every negation, in the *there is* that has "no exits". It is, if we may say so, the impossibility of death, the universality of existence even in its annihilation.' [13]

The aftermath of a crime is a rich source of horror for the criminal. The crime is an attempt to escape from the paradoxical consequences of our freedom. Levinas writes: "A free being alone is responsible, that is already not free'. A crime viewed in this light is an assertion of the self despite the supposedly binding authority of the law. But the indifference of the *il y a* to the private inwardness of the self, to the self's sense of his own wishes, triumphs and transgressions, is reinforced in a crime's aftermath. Existence carries on as though the crime had not happened. One is not delivered from the anonymity of impersonal existence by being the author of a crime. Standing comfortless

[13] *Existence and Existents.* p.56

before the accusing eyes of the corpses of his former comrades, the guilty Marinere suffers the horrifying prospect of consciousness being imprisoned with, and inescapably shackled to the anonymous, swarming being of the night.

The many men so beautiful,
And they all dead did lie!
And a million million slimy things
Liv'd on--and so did I.

I look'd upon the rotting Sea,
And drew my eyes away;
I look'd upon the eldritch deck,
And there the dead men lay.

I look'd to Heaven, and try'd to pray;
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came and made
My heart as dry as dust.

I clos'd my lids and kept them close,
Till the balls like pulses beat;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay like a load on my weary eye,
And the dead were at my feet.

The cold sweat melted from their limbs,
Ne rot, ne reek did they;
The look with which they look'd on me,
Had never pass'd away. (228-248)

The horror of the Marinere's experience on his voyage is that the intertwining of being with the nothingness of the *il y a,* the *there is*, is impressed upon him by the accusing eyes of the corpses, and by the wearying 'load' of being-in-the-world, and by the 'no exit' enforced by the 'wicked whisper' which prevents prayer.

4. Prayer and Sleep:

The Marinere affirms his ethical stance through a prayerful declaration of love. After blessing the watersnakes, the Marinere recovers the ability to pray and the ability to sleep.

The Marinere's horror is temporarily dispelled when he finds 'love' gush from his 'heart' for the 'watersnakes'.

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gusht from my heart,

And I bless'd them unaware!
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I bless'd them unaware. (274-279)

The moment at which the Marinere spontaneously blesses the snakes is marked by two crucial aspects of the ethical in Levinasian terms: the Marinere responds to alterity—the snakes are entirely other to the Marinere—and he assumes an asymmetrical relationship with them—the Marinere recognises an undeclarable beauty in the snakes and so assumes a self-transcending reverence towards them.

Moreover, the blessing of the watersnakes makes both sleep and prayer possible:

The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

O sleep, it is a gentle thing
Belov'd from pole to pole!
To Mary-queen the praise be yeven
She sent the gentle sleep from heaven
That slid into my soul. (280-288)

Sleep, for Levinas, is a repositing of consciousness and so the re-establishing of a 'here I am' from which to awaken and re-encounter the world. Sleep allows consciousness a retreat from the night, from the nothingness of a being without subjectivity. It allows consciousness to take a position and to hold this position and so begin again as a subjective existent, a self. By exercising its power to sleep, consciousness demonstrates that it has its own place from which it will awaken and that it holds this place even when the intentionality that underpins its waking relationship with the world is suspended.

The return of the Marinere's ability to pray allows him to transcend the solitude of his ego which has become more and more concentrated on the horror of his confinement with the corpses of his crew. The blessing of the snakes and his subsequent prayer reaffirm the Marinere's ethical stance towards the other: the love he discovers results in the 'I wish you peace' of the Levinasian 'bonjour'. Just as the crew called to the albatross, so the Marinere 'hails' the watersnakes in 'God's name'.

5. The Marinere's release is only temporary:

After the Marinere has blessed the watersnakes the rest of his voyage becomes an alternation between horror, states of sleep or unconsciousness, prayer and a recognition of the beauty of alterity.

The peace of sleep and the affirmation of prayer refresh the Marinere. Just as the undrinkable water of the ocean had intruded on the Marinere's consciousness as a sign of the gathering horror that followed the killing of the albatross, so now the Marinere's thirst is quenched.

> My lips were wet, my throat was cold,
> My garments all were dank;
> Sure I had drunken in my dreams
> And still my body drank.
>
> I mov'd and could not feel my limbs,
> I was so light, almost
> I thought that I had died in sleep,
> And was a blessed Ghost. (293-300)

However, this sense of a blessed suspension of the Marinere's penance gives way to horror again. In the midst of a violent storm the crew's corpses become reanimated.

And so the journey back to the Marinere's own country is marked by the intertwining of horror, unconsciousness, and moments of heart-felt reverence or joy.

The horror is caused by the presence of the crew's ghosts. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas explains how horror arises from consciousness's exposure to the dark background of existence in the night. Horror comes from the recognition that the being of the ego is necessarily and inextricably intertwined with the anonymous, swarming, rustling, substance-less being of the night. The Marinere is exposed to being without subjectivity in the presence of the ghostly crew, tormented by the sight of the unspeaking effort of the corpses at work. The crew's return as ghosts, may be read in Levinasian terms, as the 'recoil of nothingness' on the Marinere, as a horrifying encounter with the *there is*.

When discussing spectres, ghosts, and sorceresses in Shakespeare, Levinas writes this:

> Spectres, ghosts and sorceresses are not only a tribute Shakespeare pays to his time, or vestiges of the original material he composed with. They allow him to move constantly towards this limit between being and nothingness, where being insinuates itself, even in nothingness, like bubbles of the earth ('the Earth hath bubbles').

In *Macbeth* the appearance of Banquo's ghost is also a decisive experience of 'the "no exit" from existence'. Its phantom returns from the fissures through

which one has driven it. [14]

Ghosts are paradoxical presences—an inhuman personification of mere being—they serve as a horrible reminder that existence has a being which is not contained within one's subjectivity and that one's subjectivity owes the impersonal aspect of its being to this nothingness, to the night. The phantom reminds the horrified, haunted subject that, as Levinas writes, of Banquo's ghost: 'it is the shadow of being that horrifies.'[15]

The horror of the Marinere's encounter with the phantom crew lies, first, in the fact that the Marinere exists and so do the ghosts: the ghosts' existence impresses on the Marinere that consciousness or the ego partakes, like them, in the anonymous being of the night, the impersonal, elemental presence of a swarming nothingness that cannot be escaped even in death. The image of the pursuing fiend in the poem captures well this sense that horror works beyond the evidence of the senses, arising from the objectless, unidentifiable being of the night.

> Like one, that on a lonely road
> Doth walk in fear and dread,
> And having once turn'd round, walks on
> And turns no more his head:
> Because he knows, a frightful fiend
> Doth close behind him tread. (lines 451-456)

We do not need to turn our heads to know this horror because, when the distracting purposes of our being in the world, the sense and intentions we possess in daylight, give way to the vigilance of insomnia, the dark background of the being of our subjectivity looms inescapably.

Moreover, the impersonal anonymity of the ghosts' presence threatens to overwhelm the Marinere as a personage. The Marinere's existence as an 'I', a particular ego that announces his presence with a 'here I am', is horribly unsettled by the presence of the ghosts. As he works with the zombie crew, he faces the horrifying reminder that there is nothing companionable, hospitable, secure, or personal in mere being—in the face of existence without existents, the Marinere's inwardness, his consciousness, his dwelling in the light of sense, his intentionality and his being in the world are exposed as pitifully gratuitous.

The Marinere's loss of his place in the world, the threat that the anonymous being of the night will suffocate his consciousness, is signalled by a curious paradoxical anxiety the Marinere experiences: he is obsessed with the curse he sees in the crew's eyes, the accusatory look with which they died:

> An orphan's curse would drag to Hell
> A spirit from on high:
> But O! more horrible than that
> Is the curse in a dead man's eye!

[14] *Existence and Existents*. p.57
[15] Ibid.

Seven days, seven nights I saw that curse
And yet I could not die. (249-254)

At the same time, though, the Marinere fears he has become invisible:

The Marineres all 'gan pull the ropes,
But look at me they n'old:
Thought I, I am as thin as air--
They cannot me behold. (374-377)

He feels watched and judged even though he is unseen; it is as if the look in the phantoms' eyes condemns the Marinere's very soul, whilst disregarding the reality of his particular existence.

The horror of the ghosts' unseeing look is compounded by their wordlessness.

The body of my brother's son
Stood by me knee to knee:
The body and I pull'd at one rope,
But he said nought to me--
And I quak'd to think of my own voice
How frightful it would be! (333-338)

Language is crucial to consciousness. The sense and light of our being in the world depends on the language of description and demand: words give us a purchase on things, and make them available for our use. But, more importantly, it is in language that we best honour our responsibility towards the other; in the address to the other, the prayer that recognises the other's alterity and our duty to honour that alterity, consciousness transcends its solitude, the confinement of its self-serving intentionality. So the Marinere's fear of his own voice and the wordlessness of the crew around him trap him on the verge of existence without subjectivity, struggling to hold onto his purposes in the world and potentially exiled from the possibility of fulfilling the call to be ethical.

The continuing horror of the Marinere's journey though is alleviated by moments of unconsciousness—the 'swound' he is thrown into by the sudden bound of the ship, and the blackout that engulfs him as the ship finally sinks. His return to his own countree is also marked by moments of eerie beauty in which he once again encounters otherness with heartfelt reverence and joy. The Marinere's horror is dispelled and transformed into wonder by the wordless dawn chorus of the ghost crew as the sun rises, by the beautiful torch-lit presences that rise up from the sea as he approaches home, and by the silent presence of the seraph-band as they stand over the corpses of the sailors.

6. A fuller release comes in the Marinere's telling of his tale:

First, the tale enables the Marinere to posit a subject for his experience on the voyage; second, the tale enables the Marinere to honour his asymmetrical intersubjective relationship with the Wedding Guest.

Above all, the Marinere recovers himself, reconstitutes himself, repositions himself, restores the subjectivity of his private existence by undertaking to share his tale with the Wedding Guest. The telling of his tale turns the Marinere's encounter with the horror of the *il y a* into a lesson about the importance of the ethical relation between people.

And it is the hermit's brave generosity before the Marinere's alterity that allows him to frame his tale. The hermit's willingness to listen despite his fear allows the Marinere to tell his story and to take possession of the horrifying events of his journey as episodes in a narrative. He escapes the agony of his consciousness's nightmarish exposure to the spectral, anonymity of his voyage by positioning himself, in his words, as the subject who suffered the nightmare. Levinas suggests that thought can go beyond the intuition of horror. There can be an event, paradoxically when the self is almost entirely undone by madness, which can re-personalise, in Levinas's words, 'the invading, inevitable, and anonymous rustling of existence'. Levinas names such a merciful event as an 'awakening of delirium'. The 'stranglehold' of the nightmarish *there is* is loosened. Levinas suggests:

> … in spite of the annoyance or pain which can persist, the moment that I can take these states as happening to me, that I catch sight of a subject for them.[16]

That which seemed devoid of sense, the Marinere's experience on the sea—where light could be punishing, uncertain or lost in darkness or the oblivion of a 'swoon'—is re-illuminated by his tale. By finding words for the unspeakable horrors of the voyage, the Marinere offers his tale as a prayer which re-establishes himself as a subject: he confesses his crime, and admits the scenes of horror he has witnessed and so is released from the anguish they have caused him. His tale functions like his 'presageful' dream of the rain when he 'slid into sleep' to gain a temporary refuge from horror on board ship. It grants him the possibility of renewing his being in the world. He re-finds himself by turning his nightmare into a confessional prayer.

Moreover, this prayer is what might be termed a social text. It has purposeful, shared significance. The Marinere recovers himself, reconstitutes himself, repositions himself, restores the subjectivity of his private existence by undertaking to share his tale with the Wedding Guest. The telling of his tale turns the Marinere's recurring encounters with the horror of the *il y a* into a lesson about the importance of the ethical relation between people.

[16] *Existence and Existents.* p.63.

7. The poem's moral: it is right but deliberately inadequate.

The apparent simple-mindedness of the poem's ending can feel like bathos when set against the sublimity of the events and experiences of the Marinere's narrative.

> O sweeter than the Marriage-feast,
> 'Tis sweeter far to me
> To walk together to the Kirk
> With a goodly company.
>
> To walk together to the Kirk
> And all together pray,
> While each to his great father bends,
> Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
> And Youths, and Maidens gay.
>
> Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
> To thee, thou wedding-guest!
> He prayeth well who loveth well
> Both man and bird and beast.
>
> He prayeth best who loveth best,
> All things both great and small:
> For the dear God, who loveth us,
> He made and loveth all. (634-650)

Following from Stanley Cavell's distinction between two kinds of moral thinker, the legislator and the moral perfectionist, Coleridge may be viewed as a moral perfectionist. Simon Critchley summarises Cavell's notion of a moral perfectionist in these terms: he writes that the moral perfectionist believes 'that ethics has to be based on some form of existential commitment or demand that goes beyond the theoretical strictures of any account of justice or any socially instituted ethical code'. [17]

So Coleridge, before he defines the details of the moral code he seeks to uphold, wants to establish what the call to be ethical consists of. He begins by establishing the need for a law, not by defining what that law might, in its detail, practically authorise and prohibit, but by dramatizing, via the tale and experience of the Marinere, the deep existential need for ethics. This necessity arises from the recognition that what is most important about who we are depends on our ethical respect for the other.

In the light of this idea, one might say two things. First, in support of Coleridge's reply to Mrs Barbauld, that the poem has 'too much moral', one agrees that the poem's final lessons—asserting the value of communal prayer and the importance of loving other people and all God's creatures—are too

[17] Simon Critchley Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. p.28.

explicit in their recommendations, and, as it were, tarnish the poem's moral perfectionism. What the Marinere brings is an urgent lesson about the ethical foundation of his relations to those things that exist individually, particularly, and in a privacy which he cannot control or totalize. This recognition leads to an understanding that the being of the other, in its mystery, in its unknowable privacy, cannot be comprehended in such a way that the self can claim that he contains the privacy of others, their otherness.

Significantly, though, one might say that prayer and love can be understood as naming what Levinas insists should be fundamental to our relationship with the face of the other. The problem for Levinas and for Coleridge is that there is nothing especially loving about insisting on the importance of love. The force of the lesson cannot be contained or conveyed in a concise homily. The force of the lesson entails infinite responsibility that can only be honoured by the way one lives one's life and conducts one's relations with others—in our ongoing face to face relations with the other.

The rhetorical deflatus of the poem's close teaches its own lesson: our loving and our prayer are not done by insisting on the value of love and prayer. Love and prayer do not offer simple means to navigate the mysteries of being, their value partly consists in their difficulty, the demands they place on us to be creatively responsive to one another and to find new ways to be courageous in the light of unforeseen obstacles, disturbances, threats, disappointment and irrevocable loss. What the Marinere says at the close of the poem is true, but his assertions of these truths are inadequate because there is nothing good or ethical in simply uttering the moral of a fable. The incongruity of the simple-minded moralising of the poem's close being offered as a coda to the dense sublimity of the Marinere's tale reminds us that ethics finally depends on a never-to-be-completed project of interpretation: we must find our duty by maintaining an attentive responsiveness to the unresting, disturbing, particular mutability of our relationship with otherness in all its unsayable singularity.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to consider the objection, attributed to Wordsworth in a note to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads,* regarding the characterisation of the Marinere: 'he does not act but is continually acted upon.' I agree but I don't see this as a defect.

For much of the poem the Marinere *is* a consciousness incapable of action, an anti-puppet, all and solely inner life, incapable of action in the outer world, whereas the reanimated corpses of his fellow sailors, by way of horrible contrast, are without an inner life. They are being de-personalised; while the Marinere is incapacitated and forced to contemplate the nothingness of the night, the impersonal being of the *there is*. Coleridge is at pains to foreground the passivity of the Marinere. His alienated condition is emphasised by a dense array of rhetorical figures, and syntactical and semantic patterns.

- Figures of negation: no, nor, ne …ne, never

- Adjectives imply substantives are temporary, or close to vanishing
- Repeated stress on verbs of cognition
- The Marinere is repeatedly the grammatical subject of agentless passives
- Non-human presences are much more often active agents in the poem; whilst the Marinere is repeatedly a subject who contemplates

But this passivity makes the moments, in language and in sleep, when the Marinere reaffirms his subjectivity as a refuge from the night and strives to honour, in prayer-like speech, his ethical stance towards alterity all the more moving.

I have an idea that in some of Coleridge's poems—"The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere", and the Conversation poems—including 'To William Wordsworth' or 'To a Gentleman'—we encounter a benighted, immobile anti-puppet. A semi-humorous version of this figure is the lyric voice in 'This Lime Tree Bower' that cannot accompany Charles on his walk because the hot milk from the overturned skillet has scalded his foot. So he is required to sit in the bower. In 'Frost at Midnight' it's the man who stays up when everyone else has gone to bed, so he is full of inwardness, but isn't going anywhere and isn't doing anything. Hence the idea of the anti-puppet, because the puppet moves with the appearance of purpose but has no inwardness, but Coleridge's benighted, immobile anti-puppet recovers his sense of purposefulness in a prayerful resolution towards the end of the poem. There are different versions of this prayerful resolution: there is the announcement of the speaker's hopes for Hartley towards the close of 'Frost at Midnight'; there is the prayerful declaration to the absent Charles at the end of 'This Lime Tree Bower' which serves a similar purpose. But the clearest statement of this recovery in prayer is at the end of 'To a Gentleman' or 'To William Wordsworth'. When the poem's persona arises at the end of the poem he finds himself in prayer because he realises his consciousness still has a base, a place in being, which isn't suffocated by but rather allows a profound reverence towards the Wordsworth who has just recited the Prelude to him. He says: 'And I arose and found myself in prayer'.

Levinas offers a philosophy which emphasises the endlessly unstable predicament of consciousness; facing the wonder and horror of holding a position when busy with the tasks of the day, unsettled by the night, and inspired by our duty of love towards the other. And with Levinas's ideas in mind, I suggest, we might allow a morally educative aspect to John Beer's claim that Coleridge is a poet of 'the night side of nature'[18]. Since in "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere", consciousness transcends the darkness of the night with the ethical recognition that alterity cannot be subsumed by the 'melting pot' of the knowing ego. Instead the other is to be honoured with a deferential, creative, prayer-like responsiveness.

[18] John Beer in Samuel Taylor Coleridge *Poems*. Edited by John Beer (London: Everyman 1993 edition) p. xliv