A Study of Liminality in S. T. Coleridge's "The Rime…"

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IT HAS BEEN A LONG TRADITION for social scientists and anthropologists to borrow imagery and methodology often used in literature, as it has for authors to adopt ideas from anthropology and apply them to literary discourse. Following this tradition, the present article is an interdisciplinary endeavour in which literature and anthropology blend together to form a new whole, with literature as both creation and creator of culture, and anthropologist as reader and interpreter. This study investigates Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Regarding the poem as a "ritual", as that term is conceived in Victor Turner's theory of ritual and liminality, this research is going to show in what manner "The Rime…" represents Coleridge's liminal socio-political stance towards the shifts, changes, and transitions brought about by the French and Industrial revolutions, and other circumstances of the Romantic era.

Utilizing anthropological tools in reading literary texts involves more than identifying imagery, themes, symbols, patterns, and literary devices wrought into it; rather it is a way of relating the written *word* to the prevailing ideologies in which the work was brought into being. The text as cultural artefact becomes a symbol for analysis and a tool for exploration; in other words, poets, novelists, and dramatists are ethnographers by virtue of the fact that they write stories about people and their sentiments, about places, happenings, and contexts:

> In literature, the writer/observer shares a piece of the other, and overlapping pieces provide a window through which the reader may gain insights social and cultural data —into particular cultures and societies. Reading the text as cultural artifact becomes a way of participating in social research.[2]

'The notion of ritual', writes Bell, 'first emerged as a formal term of analysis in the nineteenth century to identity what was believed to be a universal category of human experience.'[3] Victor Turner's theory of ritual and the related discussions of *society, structure, anti-structure, liminality,* and *communitas* is the theoretical framework for this article, and provide the interpretative tools employed here to analyze "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

Turner observes that Van Gennep has distinguished three phases in a rite of passage: *separation, transition,* and *incorporation*. The first phase of separation clearly demarcates sacred space and time from profane or secular space and

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[2] Angelis, Rose de. *Between Anthropology and Literature: Interdisciplinary Discourse.* London: Routledge, 2003, pp.3-4; hereafter, 'De Angelis'.

[3] Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p14; hereafter 'Bell 1992'

time (it is more than just a matter of entering a temple—there must be in addition a rite which changes the quality of time also, or constructs a cultural realm which is defined as 'out of time', i.e., beyond or outside the time which measures secular routines). It includes symbolic behaviour—especially symbols of reversal or inversion of things, relationships, and secular processes—which represents the detachment of the ritual subjects (novices, candidates, neophytes or 'initiands') from their previous social status.[4] In the case of a society, it implies collectively moving from all that is socially and culturally involved in an agricultural season, or from a period of peace as against one of war, from plague to health, from a previous socio-cultural state or condition, to a new state or condition, a new turn of the seasonal wheel. This detachment of the group or individual from previous state or condition is evident in "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner" when the wedding guest is detached, through his helpless listening to the mariner's story, from shore which is a symbol for stability and routine and eventually is taken away into the sea.

The middle part of the ritual process is the most crucial for Turner. 'During the intervening phase of transition,' he observes, 'called by van Gennep "margin" or "limen" (meaning "threshold" in Latin), the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states' (Turner 1982, p.24). The third phase involves a return, which is called by van Gennep, 'reaggragation' or 'incorporation' includes symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subject to their new, relatively stable, well defined position in the total society. (Ibid)

Critics have often noted a conservative turn in Coleridge's politics. Kaiser, quoting Raymond Williams in his *Romanticism, Aesthetics, and Nationalism* writes:

> Coleridge's emphasis in his social writings is on *institutions*. […] As Burke before him, Coleridge insisted on man's need for institutions which should confirm and constitute his personal efforts.[5] (Emphasis added)

'The rejection of France by Wordsworth and Coleridge', Kaiser observes, however, 'after the French Revolution and their subsequent embrace of English nationalism signals not a retreat into conservatism, but rather an embrace of the true socially progressive force of the age.' (Kaiser 20)

The Romantic poets are similar in taking the reader to a liminal realm, 'betwixt and between', but differ in the ways they bring the reader back out of the liminal into the normal. My theory is that Coleridge, unlike Shelley and Byron, does not leave his reader alone.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", despite the ambiguities and uncertainties that critics, justified or not, lay at its door, is the story of a voyage.

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[4] Turner, Victor, *From Ritual to Theatre*: *The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Books, 1982, p.24, hereafter,'Turner 1982' (in the body of the text).

[5] *Romanticism, Aesthetics, and Nationalism,* by David Aram Kaiser, CUP (1999) p.11 – hereafter Kaiser

The Mariner's voyage is a rounded voyage that begins from home country, continues through the unknown and the terrifying, and eventually ends in home country:

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

The ship and its crew arrive at the native land in a manner that uses the same symbols of the native country that are present in lines 21-24. Here the ancient mariner in a joyful gesture recognises their arrival home:

> Oh! Dream of joy! is this indeed
> The *light house top* I see?
> Is this the *hill*? is this the *kirk*?
> Is this mine own countree? (465-8, emphasis added)

My theory is that Victor Turner's notion of ritual having three distinct phases of *preliminality* or separation, *liminality* or transition, and *postliminality* or incorporation is analogous to these three phases of mariner's voyage. Turner defines ritual as '*prescribed formal behaviour* for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects' (Turner 1982, p.79, emphases added).

The ancient mariner has a story to tell, and knows whom to *teach*—a crucial matter for my reading, as I will show. Of course it is his responsibility or burden to repeat his tale, forever and for good. A comprehensive self-definition, which testifies to his role as ritual adept, is provided at the end of *The Rime*: 'Say quick', quoth he, 'I bid thee say—/What manner of man art thou?' (576-7) The ancient mariner replies:

> Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
> With a woeful agony,
> Which *forced* me to begin my *tale*;
> And then it left me *free*. (578-81, emphasis added)

When conflict arises, ritual is inevitable:

> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns:
> And till my ghastly tale is told,
> This heart within me burns. (582-5)

I will firstly go over the preliminal and postliminal and then at length discuss liminality in "The Rime".

"The Rime" begins from *land*, goes through the *sea,* and then gets back to

the *land*. These two lands I take to be preliminal and postliminal phases of ritual, and the account of sea, the conditions of the liminal. In what follows I examine many clues that distinguish these three phases from each other.

I mentioned that Turner sees society as a process. He holds that "for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. The passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statelessness [….]. In other words, each individual's life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and *communitas,* and to states and transitions".[6]

At the beginning of the story we can easily see this structured, norm-governed, and institutionalized atmosphere.

The ancient mariner '*stoppeth*' a man who is going to a wedding feast. The gloss reads, '*An ancient mariner meeteth three Gallants bidden to a wedding feast, and detains one.*' By stopping the wedding guest, the ancient mariner is trying to detach him from a social institution, a long established one, in a way that it could be a symbol for the structure of the preliminal period. Turner holds that people in pre- and post- liminal phases avoid pain and suffering. (Ibid) This characteristic, we can easily see when the wedding guest says:

> By thy long gray beard and glittering eye,
> Now wherefore stopp'st thou me? (3-4)

Or when he commmands the mariner to

> Hold off! Unhand me, graybeard loon! (10)

It is difficult for the wedding guest to detach himself from the social structure:

> The wedding-guest here beat his breast,
> For he heard the loud bassoon.

Nevertheless, the wedding guest is forced and constrained to hear the tale. The gloss reads, '*The wedding-guest is spellbound by the eye of the old sea faring man, and constrained to hear his tale.*' He must leave the land and go into the liminal, the 'betwixt and between':

> The sun came up upon the left,
> Out of the sea came he!
> And he shone bright , and on the right
> Went down into the sea.
>
> Higher and higher everyday
> Till over the mast at noon— (25-30)

[6] Turner, Victor *Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*. Chicago: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995, p.97, hereafter Turner 1995

The mariner and his ship have reached the equator now. The gloss testifies to this, '*The mariner tells how the ship sailed southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the Line.*' *The Line* here is the equator, *between* South Pole and North Pole, and can be rightfully taken as the *betwixt and between* which Turner speaks about. The wedding guest is not so content with liminality and *inbetweenness*; therefore when the ancient mariner is reaching the liminal:

> The wedding-Guest *here* beat his breast,
> For he heard the loud bassoon. (31-32)

'…but the mariner continues his tale' (gloss). From now on the liminal phase commences. It comes with the *Storm-Blast.* The shaking and crumbling down of the initial *structure* is evident in these lines:

> And now the *Storm-Blast* came, and he
> Was tyrannous and strong;
> He struck with his O'ertaking wings,
> And chased us south along. (41-44)
>
> With *sloping* masts and dipping prow (45)
>
> The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast (49)

Then an air of ambiguity falls. Describing *liminality*, Turner argues that,

> During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject […] are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. (Turner 1995, 94)

The wedding guest has now been detached from his previous stable and structured condition and is taken to the realm of mist and snow:

> And now there came both *mist* and *snow,*
> And it grew wondrous cold:
> And ice, mast high, came floating by,
> As green as emerald. (51-54)

This atmosphere that Coleridge is depicting is an interface that inverts any or many markers of structure or *cosmos*; rather what we see is *chaosmos.* Here is the realm of paradoxes and possibilities within which one can witness a temporary suspense of system in favour of what Turner calls *anti-structure:*

> The attributes of liminality or liminal personae […] are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these people elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural state. (Turner 1995, 95)

The ambiguity and inbetweenness of the ancient mariner and his companions is also evident, in the style and pace of writing:

> The ice was here, the ice was there,
> The ice was all around:
> It cracked growled, and roared and howled,
> Like noises in a *Swound*! (59-62)

The text itself has been entrapped in a state of repetition, and unlike previous stanzas there is a slow-down of narrative. The anaphoric *ice* testifies to this. Besides, another attribute of liminality is the extremeness that it exhibits.

Here ice is everywhere; nothing but ice; the sound of cracking ice also reminds the mariner of the *noises in a swound. Swound* means lack of consciousness or awareness, thereby pointing toward ambiguity of liminal period. With the introduction of Albatross the tale takes a new turn because 'the albatross proveth a bird of good omen' (gloss). It saves the ship from idleness:

> The ice did split with a thunder-fit;
> The helmsman steered us through! (69-70)

So much for the preliminal or separation phase. In what follows it is explained how liminality manifests itself through the rest of *The Rime.*

'Liminal entities are neither here nor there' (Turner 1995, 95). This characteristic of liminal subjects is evident throughout *The Rime.* The shipmates leave their country, and immediately reach the line:

> The Sun came up upon the left,
> […] and on the right,
> Went down into the sea. (25-28)

Then, '*The ship is driven by a storm toward the South Pole*' (Gloss). With the introduction of the albatross, '*the ship* [….] *returned northward*' (Gloss). And again in Part 2 'it reached the Line.' This immediate shift of location best corresponds with *neither-here-nor-there-ness* of liminal period; of course, any conception of normal, everyday time and space is rendered inapplicable here. Liminal entities 'are betwixt and between the positions' (Turner 1995, 95). In *The Rime*, time and place are not central to the incidents; that is, the time is not a linear, Aristotelian concept. It is circular, and ends where it begins. *The Rime* begins when the wedding guest is going to the marriage feast and at the end, the feast is still happening; the markers of home country are exactly present both at the beginning and ending; the ship departs while it is 'Below the *kirk,* below the *hill.* / Below the *light house top'* (23-24), and what strikes the mariner when he sees his homeland are exactly the same as those I just mentioned:

> Oh! Dream of joy! Is this indeed
> The *light house top I see*?

Is this the *hill?* Is this the *kirk?*

Thus, the journey is a circular one. It begins and ends in the same place and time, but the important thing is what goes on in '*betwixt and between*'. Turner believes that "in liminality people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combination of familiar things" (note the similarity to Coleridge's account of the secondary imagination in *Biographia Literaria*). Then, it follows that, every procession which has a liminal phase, offers the subjects or participants sacred or secular truths. They will be enlarged and supplemented. The liminal phase equips the participants with enough utility to cope with problem before or ahead of them; thus in every liminal experience, the participants are themselves *plus something*; this *something*—to adopt the discourse of computing—is the participant's *update*, which, in order to continue his order normal life, he must be patched to.

Another characteristic of liminality is a 'blend […] of lowliness and sacredness, of *homogeneity and comradeship*' which is recognized 'in a symbol if not always in language.' It 'emerges as recognizably in the liminal period, [and] is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *commitatas*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders' (Turner 1995, 96). This is *Communitas*, a state of *all-alikeness*. In *The Rime,* there are several manifestations of *communitas*: the shipmates act as if they are one entity. For example in recreation to the ancient mariner's killing of the albatross, shipmate which are 'Four times fifty living men' (216)

… *all* averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow.
Ah wretch! Said they, the bird to slay,
That made the breeze to blow. (93-96 emphases added)

Then, immediately in the next stanza they *all*, in an ambiguous and paradoxical way, which is typical of liminal phase, justifying the mariner's act:

The *all* averred, I had killed the bird
That brought the fog and mist. (Emphases added)

Indeed, there are many occurrences of words like *each* and *all*. In the opening stanza of part3:

There passed a weary time *each* throat
Was parched, and glazed *each* eye.
(143-144, emphases added)

The linguistic repetition bears witness to this inert and stationary situation:

And all the boards did shrink;

> Water, water, everywhere,
> Nor any drop to drink. (119-122, emphases added)

Or in the previous stanza, 'Day after day, day after day, / We stuck, nor breath nor motion' (115-116). Apart from repetition and inertness, there are paradoxical situations here, water is everywhere and the boards are shrinking and there is no drop to drink. It is a major feature of the threshold phase to have paradox at its heart, because as was mentioned earlier, no normal, structured, and rule-governed system can rationalize and explain away an already completely suspended and hung anti-structure.

From all this, I want to conclude that the ambiguity of which many critics of *The Rime* have complained is *structural* in the poem; that is, it is part of the constitution of it, without which there could be no liminal or threshold phase.

And so, the return. The *slimy things* here, are 'the creatures of the calm' (gloss). The process of the mariner's fall from human to animal is evident in three stanzas beginning from line 263 until 276. At first he is beholding 'the moving moon *up the sky*' as 'softly she was going *up*', then 'her beams bemocked the sultry *main*'. At last his eyes reach 'beyond the shadow of the ship' and can now see the water snakes. This is a crucial moment in the story after which the narrative gains a higher pace, and it is as if everything is becoming normal again. '*The spell begins to break*' (Gloss).

> And I blessed them unaware
> Sure my kind saint took pity on me
> And I blessed them unaware. (285-87)

A new structure is on the verge of arising from the liminal. The gloss explicitly announces the end of the liminal antistructure: '*The curse is finally expiated.*'

> And now, all in my own countree,
> I stood on the firm land!

The conclusion to this article is twofold; one is connected to Coleridge and his socio-political ideas as represented in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"; the other is on the interactions of and dealings between *literature* and *anthropology*. As concerns the first issue, we can see Coleridge as a moderate socio-political thinker whose foremost strategies and tactics against the drastic and overwhelming changes and transitions of the Romantic era involving coping and reconciliation; that is, to help Englishmen *cope* with these changes and reconcile them with the state.

Regarding the second conclusion, I must highlight the role of anthropology and the important tools that it offers, to help analyse literature from different perspectives—rather in the manner of comparative literature. The present study has been an interdisciplinary endeavour, in an attempt to relate the *word* of a poem to its *world*.