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An I for an Eye: “Spectral Persecution” in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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Here . . . consciousness has not assumed its rights and transformed into signifiers those fluid demarcations of yet unstable territories where an “I” that is taking shape is ceaselessly straying.

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (11)

COLERIDGE’S DEFINITION of “Imagination,” though notoriously obscure, is clear in affirming that this “esemplastic power” “struggles to idealize and to unify” (*Biographia* 1: 295, 304). It follows (according to chapter 14 of his *Biographia Literaria*) that the true poem is “a graceful and intelligent whole” (2: 18; my emphasis). With these statements and the declaration that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is “a poem of pure imagination” (*Table Talk* 273), Coleridge inspired a critical search for this work’s inherent unity.

This quest impelled Robert Penn Warren to view *The Rime*, in his canonical reading, as a narrative of the “one life” and of the “sacramental unity” of the creative imagination (222, 214). Jerome McGann’s essay “*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: The Meaning of the Meanings” has been hailed as a definitive escape from Warren.¹ A refreshing demystifier of musty critical metaphysics, McGann argues that Coleridge’s faith in symbolism is itself “epochal,” founded on a “Romantic ideology”; hence the poet’s “much-discussed symbolic method is nothing more (or less) than rhetorical machinery for producing . . . interpretive results” (152). In recognizing the poem’s ideology, he concludes, one may reclaim the text as a “human—a social and historical—resource” (172). Even McGann, however, presupposes a Coleridgean ideology: the “meanings” have one “meaning.”

Yet *The Rime* seems extravagantly *disunified*, composed of interruptions, disruptions, and interruptions. Split between gloss and ballad, prose and verse, the two-column poem partitions commentary and narrative, philosophical and emotive languages. A disjointed, seven-part story, the ballad concerns an interrupted wedding and describes abrupt appearances and vanishings, intense, unmotivated passions. Even the divisions between gloss, frame, and tale are interrupted: the wedding guest twice stops the Mariner, and in the pivotal gloss about the “journeying Moon” (263–71), poetry intrudes into the prose. The work’s generic affinities represent another kind of boundary violation—Coleridge’s appropriation of popular Gothic conventions to “serious” poetic purpose.

Thus the Mariner’s cognitive conclusion—“He prayeth best, who loveth best” (614)—concludes nothing. He is doomed to repeat forever the struggle “to idealize and to unify.” (As many readers have noted, the Mariner suffers from “repetition compulsion.”) Moreover, it seems that the Mariner has jumped to his conclusion, for his spiritual moral curiously elides the material horrors of his experience. *The Rime* is like a figure-ground paradox—the rabbit-duck drawing, for instance. In describing his “spectral persecution,” as Wordsworth called it, and then asserting its lesson of Fatherly love, the Mariner delineates a rabbit and then declares it a duck.² Yet the poem’s coherence resides in the interdependence of meaning and of experience. I propose, therefore, that *The Rime* enacts the process by which the speaking subject—the user of language, the teller of tales—is constituted. The poem concerns not the creative Imagination so much as the creation of Imagination. There may be less frightful roads to language, but for Coleridge’s Mariner, the creation of the I in the perception of the eye is a spectral flight from unspeakable horrors.

The Mariner’s (M)Other

Gothic conventions are thus suited to this tale, a fact that might—in another argument altogether—suggest a new theory of the Gothic. But Coleridge’s material debt to this mode has been

denied, ignored, and repressed by professional Romanticists. James D. Boulger’s remark that “Coleridge was not a fool writing a pot-boiler for an audience of ‘Gothic’ sensibility” (14) candidly expresses the mainstream assumption that the mode merely panders to readers of slight intellect and low taste. (Indeed, Coleridge’s ambivalent review of *The Monk* contains some similar pronouncements about “the horrible and the preternatural” [*Monk* 370].³) This repression of the Gothic is congruent with the philosophical and theological critics’ confidence that the “Night-mare Life-in-Death” (193) reveals the law of the father, for the Gothic expresses dark, distant otherness—the culturally female at its most extravagant and threatening. And though the Mariner’s bizarre, dreamlike story might seem to invite a Freudian hermeneutic, classical psychoanalysis has also failed *The Rime*. As Freud’s feminist critics have pointed out, the father of psychoanalysis did not admit, or even perceive, the power of the mother.⁴

Julia Kristeva’s theories concerning the emergence of the subject offer a powerful alternative framework for understanding *The Rime*. According to Kristeva, the speaking subject is split, inhering in the dynamic interdependence of the symbolic and the semiotic, figuring the law of the father against the unrepresentable ground of the repressed mother. The formation of the subject is a process: “Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed upon this body . . . by family and social structures” (*Black Sun* 264).⁵ Horror is the symptom of the not yet self’s “abjection” (casting off) of the maternal and material. Once constituted, the speaking subject is not fixed but is always *en procès* (both in process and on trial). Poetic language, in its sounds, rhythms, and disruptions of the symbolic’s semantic and syntactic laws, evokes the pulsions and drives of the semiotic maternal *chora*, “this rhythmic space, which has no thesis and no position, the process by which signifi-ance is constituted” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 26). Of course, any poem, no matter how poetic, in Kristeva’s sense, always remains within the sym-

bolic, because poetry is composed of language; a text may, nevertheless, manifest the semiotic's disruptive, even revolutionary, energies.

Coleridge's narrative (including frame and gloss) may be read as a representation of semiotic intrusion into the symbolic universe.⁶ The Mariner appears as if from nowhere (the non-world of the unspeakable), and when he leaves, the guest is "like one that hath been stunned, . . . sadder and . . . wiser" (622, 624), realizing new, though unspeakable and unspoken, dimensions of reality. Not only does the Mariner express the hitherto unimaginable; he also, peculiarly, represents the mother. He is an archetype (i.e., a culture-wide symbol), the wise old man, whose hypnotic "glittering eye" (3) implies the Lacanian phallic gaze of simultaneous identity and alienation. But the text also repeatedly links him with the conventionally female in Western culture: the sea, irrationality, motherhood, and nature—"spontaneous" energies that challenge and disrupt symbolic order. The guest calls him a "grey-beard loon" (11); when the Mariner moved his lips, the pilot shrieked and "fell down in a fit," while the pilot's boy "doth crazy go" (560–61, 565). The Mariner's purpose in life is to instruct the young, a role traditionally relegated to mothers: the wedding guest is like a "three years' child" (15) compelled to listen to a nightmare nanny's terrible bedtime story.⁷

The Mariner chooses his listeners with "feminine" intuitiveness, and he describes the repeated reproduction of his tale in terms suggesting the onset of birth:

[T]his frame of mine was wrenched
With a woful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale;
And then it left me free.

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns. . . . (578–83)

This unwilling bearer of the word is associated with Mother Nature's cyclic rhythms: he is "long, and lank, and brown, / As is the ribbed sea-sand" (226–27); he says, "I pass, like night, from land to land" (586). His ship reminds the hermit of nature's brutality, of the season when "the owlet whoops to the wolf below, / That eats

the she-wolf's young" (536–37). His "strange power of speech" (587), though more intelligible than that of Keats's *Belle Dame*, brings the sort of message from the beyond that Romantic poets usually hear in a female voice.

This fusion of female with male both represents poetic discourse and may exemplify how I believe the text "means." This mariner-mother ignores the symbolic law of identity (which dictates that a mariner is only a mariner and a mother only a mother); yet the figure is still readable if other symbolic connections are attended to. As a whole, the Mariner's tale ignores the symbolic law of cause and effect, but his vivid images link with other powerful but usually tacit ways of making sense. These alternatives include assumptions about what is male and what female—fundamental and virtually unconscious ordering principles—and the perceptual and cognitive "maps" that George Lakoff and Mark Turner call "basic metaphors," whose use is "conventional, unconscious, automatic, and typically unnoticed" (80): "life is a journey," for instance, or "freedom is up" (221–22).

As a speaking subject, the Mariner exists within the symbolic; but he disrupts its present order in and through his tale, which so disturbs the wedding guest. And in affirming the love of an absent, distant, ideal father, his words, like his person, imply that the other of which he speaks remains incommensurate, unassimilated, and powerful. Thus it is appropriate that in conclusion the Mariner describes the model community, family members who in praying to their invisible "great Father" are related by spirit, not blood. He insists that life's greatest sweetness is "To walk together to the kirk, / And all together pray": "Old men, and babes, and loving friends / And youths and maidens gay!" (601–09). And yet no married women and mothers appear in his congregation (not surprising for one who keeps young men from weddings). In compulsively speaking of love as ideal, universal, asexual, and fatherly, he ignores its concrete, erotic, and social dimensions culturally linked with the mother: agape represses eros. Though he has left the ocean for the land, he must wander eternally from one surrogate "child" to another, telling and retelling his story. In his strangeness,

his marginality, he is the exception that proves the rule (or the neurosis that discloses the unconscious structure). He is a speaking subject whose subject is his own subjectivity; he exists only as a subject manifestly and eternally *en procès*.

“Voyaging through Strange Seas of Thought”

A wedding is an appropriate occasion for this revolutionary disruption of the law of the father, for the ceremony is patriarchy's central ritual for regulating the female—the bride takes her husband's name and her place in the culture. The Mariner's dreamlike tale, though told and heard, is virtually nonsensical, almost failing to mesh with the structures that impart meaning to experience. But only such a tale could represent the semiotic—a series of disjointed, emotionally charged images evoking the eye's oceanic voyage toward the I-land of self-consciousness. After the Mariner emerges from the water, his first act is a speech act, a response to the hermit's question “What manner of man art thou?” (577).

Coleridge's seven parts imply what the story relates: that this process is no smooth, overtly purposeful voyage but a series of violent, often apparently random motions punctuated with periods of stasis and stagnation. The tale begins with an unquestionable first premise: “There was a ship” (10). The vessel setting out on its journey constitutes a basic metaphor for the body beginning life. The ship's movements follow the pulsions and rhythms of fluid, preoedipal drives, of the semiotic *chora*. As Wordsworth observed, the Mariner is extraordinarily passive (361). In part 1 this passivity appears not only in the narrator's grammar, characterized by passive voice and intransitive verbs: “The ship was cheered . . .”; “Merrily did we drop . . .” (21, 22). Coleridge's language here also tends to decenter the subject position; the narrator uses the first-person plural, barely distinguishes chronological sequence, and lacks both a precise perspective on the action and a firm sense of cause and effect.

At first the mariners perceive only a rhythm of natural variation—the rising and the setting of the sun. They already associate this elemental cyclicity, however, with a rudimentary sense of spatiality, of right and left. The rhythm is dis-

turbed by the “Storm-blast,” which drives the vessel into the frozen Antarctic. These early stanzas contain no speculation, as opposed to observation, no sense of sequence or cause—only recognition of events: “And now the STORM-BLAST came . . .”; “And now there came both mist and snow . . .” (41, 51). These experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, evoke intense though general sensations, of violent motion, loud noise, bright color (the ice is as “green as emerald” [54]).

Most important, these natural phenomena are always already gendered. The sun and the storm are “he,” while the moon is “she.” Warren rightly emphasizes the contrasting and complementary functions of sun and moon in *The Rime*. But his contention that these figures represent “reason” and “imagination” is, as many have noted, debatable. I propose that their function is simpler, more concrete: in the mariners' evolving sense of reality, the sun, like the wind, is associated with father and the male, and the moon, like the water, is related to mother and the female.⁸

The masculine and feminine are each linked, however, with both pleasant and unpleasant sensations. The father sun first implies comforting regularity, something to wonder at (26) and to depend on—at least until hidden by storm clouds. But the storm blast, also male, is experienced as an abusive father who “Was tyrannous and strong: / He struck with his o'ertaking wings, / And chased us south along” (42–44). The epic simile describing the ship's response evokes a cowering child who can only flee:

As who pursued with yell and blow
Still treads the shadow of his foe,
And forward bends his head,
The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,
And southward aye we fled. (46–50)

This “paternal” violence drives the vessel into the cold. A familiar metaphor for rejection, ice is an apt figure for the transformation of good mother into bad: the tropically warm, liquid medium hitherto supporting the ship turns hard and frigid, frustrating (e)motion.

When the albatross appears, both of these external and gendered forces have already

caused suffering: the warm father sun has disappeared, and the father wind has rained down hostile blows; the mother ocean has turned to ice. The albatross, however, connotes mother *and* father in both good and bad aspects. A creature of sea and air, it is associated both with “mist and snow” and with the beneficent moonshine. Winged like the masculine storm blast, it also seems to bring “the good south wind.” The bird, however, is consistently called “it.” In making the albatross a pet (it shares the childish activities of “food or play”), the sailors establish a quasi-familial relationship with this external object that is almost, though not quite, a person (greeted “As if it had been a Christian soul” [my emphasis]). The bird also evokes the mariners’ first purposeful articulation. (“Hail” and “hollo” are emotive rather than denotative but are more focused than the poem’s previous noises, the “loud roar” of the blast, the “crack,” “growl,” “roar,” and “howl” of the ice.) The whole episode is indeterminate, however, shrouded in “mist,” “cloud,” “fog-smoke,” and “Moonshine” (41–78).

As the closest thing to a personal object yet encountered, the albatross appears to draw the hostility aroused in the Mariner by the forces harrying the vessel; the creature affords him the first opportunity for self-expression (and hence for selfhood), a virtually automatic imitation of blows experienced, implying a physics in which every psychic action is answered by an equal and opposite reaction. Shooting the albatross, the Mariner destroys the mistily pleasurable community of sailors and bird—a relation of not yet self and not quite other.⁹

From the symbolic retrospect of language, the shooting represents an experience inevitable in the attainment of selfhood and subjectivity: separation from matter and from *mater*. This experience inaugurates what Kristeva calls the thetic stage—the crucial, inexorable emergence of a sense of self and not self—beginning with the mirror stage and ending with the discovery of castration (*Revolution* 46). From this perspective, the most familiar, bewildering question about the poem—why the Mariner shoots the albatross—appears utterly irrelevant. Notions of cause and effect (or of psychological motiva-

tion) are created by the symbolic order: not effects but affects are relevant to the preoedipal. The Mariner’s tale is disturbing and original because it shows preoedipal affects coalescing and transforming into symbolic faith in effects. The painful intensity of this first self-recognition, the Mariner’s mirror stage, is represented by the violence of the act. A striking detail of grammar confirms that the shooting is significant precisely as a first deed, a self-creating act: here the Mariner uses the pronoun “I” for the first time —“I shot the ALBATROSS” (82).

Part 2 chronicles the mariners’ resulting recognition of absence. The familiar natural rhythms continue, but the missing bird excites the sailors’ first speculation (of a double kind: they scrutinize their surroundings and construct a hypothesis). In this early attempt at “reading,” they try out the possibility that contingency and causation are the same. Since the good breeze followed the bird’s arrival, they expect that the breeze will vanish after the killing. Initially inclined to think that the deed is “hellish” (the vanished bird is called “sweet”), they subsequently see the rising of the “glorious Sun” as affirmation that the killing is “right” (87–102).¹⁰

Increasingly specific perceptions accompany these tentative gestures. Other modes of absence intrude on the senses of the mariners, who notice silence and in the lack of wind feel the lack of motion. Matter seems to shrink away, like the boards of the ship. And though it may have been right to slay the albatross, the emptiness is painful. The Mariner reports that the sailors “speak only to break” the silence (109), though his narrative contains as yet no direct discourse. But horror—physical revulsion—is their most salient response:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea. (123–26)

Such a response is predicted by Kristeva’s theory of abjection, in which horror is the symptom the fragile not yet self exhibits when about to separate from the mother: “the abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold

of *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away. . . ." In abjection, the subject inescapably responds to corporeality, recognizes its own dependence on materiality. As Kristeva notes, "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection" (*Powers* 15, 2). The mariners experience the waters of the sea, of the "mother" of life, as undrinkable; hence its "slimy" surface teems with "rot," or the opposite of nourishment.

The intensifying stress of part 2 ends with the poem's second explicit action. Having begun with the mariners' attempt to see meaning in the albatross's death, the section concludes with a quasi-symbolic gesture: "Instead of the cross, the Albatross / About my neck was hung" (141–42). The gloss declares, "The shipmates, in their sore distress, would fain throw the whole guilt on the ancient Mariner: in sign whereof they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck." But in the poem, the passive voice again masks the subject; the Mariner merely records that the bird was put there, as a clumsy replacement intended to alleviate the symptoms of losing the living albatross. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva argues that as waste is a source of abjection, the corpse manifests the condition most potently (18). The carcass of the albatross represents the abject becoming the object. The difference here between gloss and Mariner's narrative is significant in showing that separation and the attempt to mark or mask the gap created with a substitute are coeval with guilt. In establishing a link between "cause" and affect, the dead bird is not yet a symbol, however. The mariners grope toward the symbolic, the conventional substitution of one thing for an absent other, but the abject corpse of the albatross represents the bird's own death. The sign of the albatross's death is the dead albatross. The concept of substitution has appeared, but the signifier virtually *is* the signified.

Nevertheless, this event marks the second stage of the Mariner's voyage. The Warren tradition reads the curious phrase "Instead of the cross" as support for a Christian interpretation of the text. What is fundamental, crucial, in both the Warren reading and mine is the role of

substitution in the constitution of the symbolic. Christian atonement is effected when innocent Christ replaces guilty humanity. The mariners' action thus discloses a link among the structure of the symbolic, the theological concept of redemptive sacrifice, and an idea of the sacred. In *The Rime* the death of the "harmless Albatross" (401) gives rise to the notion of guilt as both having offended and having merely acted,¹¹ a notion that motivates the idea of symbolic substitution. The Mariner's existence as a speaking subject, his "salvation," coincides with his escape from oceanic isolation, his capacity to tell his tale. Only then, when the albatross's death is mediated through speech, a system itself dependent on substitution, does it become possible to interpret the killing as redemptive. Indeed, only at this point is the death a sacrifice; only then does this creature, which impels the transition from nonself to I, become sacred. (For until there is a speaking subject, there is no meaning, sacred or otherwise; and, conversely, as Kristeva comments, "[s]acrifice reminds us that the symbolic emerges out of material continuity, through a violent and unmotivated leap" [*Revolution* 77].) The uncanny resonance of the albatross's death, I suspect, thus springs from the bird's symbolic dissonance within the ballad. The death fails to conform to the symbolic rules of sacrifice even while exposing their fundamental principle—the notion of substitution as a reparation for loss, lack, absence.

The Mariner's Family Romance

In part 3 the horror of the persons on board the "spectre-bark" shocks the Mariner into a new stage of development. After appearing at the climax of part 1, the pronoun "I" alternates with "we" in part 2. In part 3, though "we" still appears occasionally, the narrative voice increasingly shares the Mariner's perspective, as if his vision were becoming more focused, giving another signal of emerging selfhood. He describes the approaching ship with increasing specificity, seeing first a "something" and then "a little speck," "a mist," a "shape," and finally "a sail!" (148–61). At this recognition he utters the first direct discourse of his narrative—words spoken

out of a need so terrible that he sucks his own blood to pronounce them. (This blood is the first hint that the Mariner has an interior dimension; the “autovampirism” may suggest the presence of a kind of literal inner resource, as well as connoting the sublimation of the abject.) He expresses a devout, enthusiastic faith that “she” comes “[h]ither to work us weal” (168). Yet the first spoken words—“A sail! a sail!”—name and summon not the nourishing mother but the specter bark: his first denotative use of language is ambiguous. The Mariner’s developing negative experience of the maternal as ice and as rot is now realized in the person of the “Night-mare Life-in-Death.”

The vessel’s passengers offer considerable insight into the Mariner’s avoidance of weddings. He asks a series of questions that lead toward certainty:

And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
Is DEATH that woman’s mate?

*Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was white as leprosy,
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man’s blood with cold.* (187–94)

Here are Eros and Thanatos in the same boat, as it were, and one remarkably like the Mariner’s own, as the Hermit’s later description reveals (529–37).

Classical Freudian theory would interpret this grouping as an oedipal triangle, but the configuration is bizarrely skewed in a decidedly unclassical way. The woman has the gold hair, red lips, white skin of many a ballad heroine, but her erotic beauty implies danger and disease—no temptations to incest here. The climax of the passage occurs when the Mariner names her by her function, to “thick man’s blood with cold”—the sign that represents her is still virtually metonymic, contingent. The father figure here is Death himself, instrument of the last and greatest “castration.” This mother comes hither not to “work us weal” but to gamble with Death. Indeed, this Nightmare appears to confirm

Madelon Sprengnether’s argument in *The Spectral Mother* that maternal desire is the one thing that patriarchy cannot accommodate: what is most horrible here is the implication that the figure is powerful, free, and indifferent to the nascent subject. The Mariner, like the protagonists in all Gothic romance, holds a family secret in his heart of darkness. These apparitions are his “parents,” their legacy the knowledge that he belongs—randomly and temporarily—to mother, the fatal woman, the slimy sea, rotting *mater*, darkness.

As Life-in-Death claims victory, the sun sets, darkness falls, and the specter bark vanishes. The mariners now experience motionlessness as suspense while, for a terrible moment, they wait: “We listened and looked sideways up! / Fear at my heart, as at a cup, / My life-blood seemed to sip!” (203–05; my emphases). The Mariner and his shipmates outwardly behave alike, though the blood the Mariner drank in summoning the bark is now echoed figuratively by his simile, as if feeding the private fear that sets him apart and marking his progress toward the symbolic. In responding to the absence of the bark, displaying anxiety about the nonmaterial, about the future, he implies an incipient capacity for imagination.

The suspense resolves itself by the rising of “The hornéd Moon, with one bright star / Within the nether tip” (210–11). The vessel that had materialized out of the sun vanishes like the sun over the horizon, seemingly beneath the ocean’s surface. In a movement emblematic of primal repression, the Madonna-like moon appears in place of the bark. Intolerably erotic, personified horror disappears, and its opposite—distant rather than near, moving gently and predictably, summoning rather than being summoned—rises from the depths of the ocean. The moon reappears with “one bright star / Within the nether tip”; won by Life-in-Death, the Mariner is one indeed. Hence the shipmates die as the moon rises, a development that realizes his condition. The identity or agency hitherto diffused among the group now entirely coalesces into an agonizing self-consciousness: the mariners become the Mariner.

Now he must relive, and more intensely, the

miseries following the death of the albatross. Part 4 recounts the pains of “I-solation,” of one man as an island in the “wide wide sea” (233). This section repeats the pronoun “I” fifteen times, and the long *i* is almost obsessively echoed in rhyme and patterns of assonance. The very sounds of the words point to the source of the Mariner’s anxiety. He is an I—one and alone—and yet he shares “I-ness,” life, with everything around him. He experiences life as horrible because it suggests the indeterminacy, the fragility, of his own I. Painfully aware of himself, he also perceives the horrible materiality of the other *i*’s in the world: “And a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did I” (238–39).

Furthermore, the Mariner recognizes the others’ deaths as an unambiguously personal reproach, for the stronger his identity as an agent, the stronger his capacity for guilt:

An orphan’s curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man’s eye! (257–60)

The Mariner’s I is confirmed by his guilty sense that he is looked at—the gaze, according to Lacan, effects alienation. Of course, the Mariner *is* responsible, the agent of the others’ deaths, for it was the consequence of his emerging I. And like the albatross, the corpses remain as signs of the abject, of the cast off, horrible reminders of the self’s painful, violent birth through separation and isolation.

At this point, the Mariner is an orphan—his father and mother have vanished—and his brother sailors are dead. His feeling of lack (which is partly a relief, given the horror of the parental figures) explains his eventual allegiance to the family of God the Father. As Freud writes in “Family Romances,” imagining a father who is a nobleman or king enables the neurotic to deal with intolerable familial circumstances. This, I suggest, is the situation of the Mariner just before he blesses the water snakes: he is a child terrified and abandoned, afloat on the loathsome, slimy bosom of terrible Mother Nature.¹² Dawning self-consciousness is coeval with

guilt. Where can he go but up? He denies the family of nature and humankind by sublimating the abject—by leaping into a “true” and satisfying spiritual membership in the family of God the Father, by crossing the threshold of the symbolic.

Seeing Eye to Eye

Through part 4 the Mariner’s account of his experiences portrays the world through the eyes of an I in formation. As materiality forces itself on the mariners’ notice and a sense of spatiality begins to emerge, the world becomes increasingly complex. To this point, this vessel has been voyaging on the surface of the ocean, and what is underneath belongs to a beyond of which he has no concept. The Mariner apparently never sleeps, though he says that others dream (131–32). The mariners’ psychic stirrings, their primitive attempts to find meaning in events, have been focused on the horizontal plane and have been fundamentally metonymic—meaning arises from contiguity (as when the sailors use the albatross as a sign of its own death).

When the moon displaces the specter bark in part 3, the Mariner’s world begins to reorganize itself along the vertical plane: displacement, a metonymic primary process hitherto dominant, is replaced by the metaphoric function of condensation. The disappearance of the bark and the reappearance of the moon not only “cause” the death of the other mariners; the events also imply that the ocean’s depths effect some transforming magic. In Freudian depth psychology, this substitution is called a “compromise formation”: the specter bark with its horrible figures becomes tolerable when contemplated as the moon, a maternal presence now distant in the fatherly mode. But such a compromise does not entirely allay anxiety. The moon becomes desirable when it creates the possibility of desire by becoming unreachable.

The same moon, now risen much higher, presides over the Mariner’s blessing of the water snakes. The detail of a “star or two beside” gives the moon a maternal quality (266), reinforced by the reference to an “orphan’s curse.” The rela-

tionship between orphan child and mother moon is still metonymic but barely so, since the chief effect of the conjunction is to contrast a low realm (of orphans, curses, guilt, vile ocean, repellent life, stasis), occupied by the Mariner, with a high one (of mother and child, softness, movement). Thus the moon, though unreachable, at least displays to the Mariner an alternative to his miserable state. The power of the affect that the moon provokes is demonstrated by the glossist, who waxes poetic for the first and only time. The annotative simile of celestial homecoming parallels and affirms the Mariner's displacement upward. What happens can be expressed only by using home as a metaphor for the lost bliss of pure nonselfhood.

Then the Mariner looks again at the snakes, those ambiguously phallic creatures of the mother that epitomize the horrors of materiality. When he sees the snakes in the light of the moon, his eye effects an affirmative transformation, a comic re-vision of nature, a repression of the abject: "Her beams bemocked the sultry main, / Like April hoar-frost spread," he says (267–68). "Beams," referring to irradiation, connotes smiles, while "bemocked" means "laughed at," and the simile "Like April hoar-frost spread" is comically incongruous, a natural joke, for frost in April is transient and delusive. The moonlight on the "sultry" waves makes them appear the opposite of what they seemed before—they appear cool rather than hot, light rather than dark, attractive rather than repellent.

The Mariner's response to this transformation expresses his first re-cognition:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware. (282–87)

In naming the sea creatures, he escapes into the symbolic, where love, life, and beauty are aspects of a single, unified whole. This re-vision is the Mariner's first, empowering experience of the eye-I's capacity to dominate and organize per-

ception, a discovery that frees him from *mater* and matter. Most telling, this liberating love (and its adequate expression) presupposes the unknowable and the unspeakable, in the repression of the maternal and the material. "Spring," "love," and "gushed" all figuratively represent the fluid, feminine other that now belongs to the unconscious (personified as "my kind saint").¹³ The other functions both as a sign of this new organization of the eye-I and as a necessary source of vital energy from beyond.¹⁴ At last the Mariner's words rise up to heaven. Prayer is surely language at its most symbolic, communication directed "upward" toward an unseen and invisible other. The albatross falls "[l]ike lead into the sea" (291). The ocean, now functioning as the unconscious, mercifully hides the body, abject reminder of self-creating guilt.

Spectral Persecution

The Mariner's journey homeward is undoubtedly less compelling than his outward voyage. Between his blessing and his confession to the hermit—the Mariner's first experience as a speaking subject¹⁵—the tale confirms the symbolically ordered structure of the I. Yet the supernatural machinery in this segment lacks the uncanny materiality of the earlier specters, as well as their vivid hues.¹⁶ In blessing the snakes, the Mariner enacts and at the same time participates in the system founded on a recognized distinction between self and other, matter and spirit, speakable and unspeakable, conscious and unconscious. His subsequent experiences confirm these boundaries and divisions. Having known consciousness for the first time, he finally sleeps. His dreams reiterate the new primacy of spirit: "I dreamt that [the buckets] were filled with dew; / And when I awoke, it rained." His mind feels separate from his body—he feels liberated from matter altogether—as if he were "a blessed ghost" (299–300, 308).

The wind returns in a sublime mode reminiscent of the Pentecostal wind, and the rainstorm comes on. (Perhaps in the phrase "upper air" [313] Coleridge unconsciously echoes the "upper room" where the apostles received the gift of

tongues.) But now natural forces are neither male nor female. Lunar movement and wind-storm are magnificent but utterly remote celestial events. The reanimation of the dead sailors further affirms the power of spirit. As cast-off (abject) parts of the Mariner himself, their bodies neither “rot nor reek” (254), but the revival of the sailors through spiritual intervention suggests that they continue to inhabit the Mariner’s unconscious. Their language is now the sweet music of birdsong, the echolalia of the semiotic.¹⁷

Parts 5 and 6 describe the appearance of the superego, unconscious parental voice of right and wrong. After fainting from a sudden rush of blood to his head, the Mariner hears two voices that attribute a spiritual cause to the albatross’s death: a “spirit . . . loved the bird that loved the man / Who shot him with his bow.” Experienced within the structure of the patriarchal symbolic, the voices belong to spiritual beings assimilated to the masculine, yet the one identified as “he” and who calls the other “brother” has a voice as “soft as honey-dew.” They speak authoritatively about moral and physical cause and effect (though their explanation of the ship’s motion is dubious). The Mariner, while unconscious, overhears their talk of expiation: “The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do” (402–20).

Warren assumes that the moral law the Mariner overhears is the Christian paradigm of “crime and punishment and reconciliation” (233), finding in this reading affirmation of Coleridge’s “sacramental unity.” But in fact the law seems closer to the “love, guilt, and reparation” that Melanie Klein argues is the main theme of preoedipal experience. Since infantile connections with the mother cannot be literally reestablished once they are severed, the adult re-creates them in symbolic modes. Ideas of “penance” or expiation discover a principle of cause and effect in the ideal or psychological realm as well as in the physical one. Indeed, Freud’s observation of his grandson’s *fort-da* game is also relevant. The child invented the ritual of throwing away and retrieving a spool to relieve his anger over his mother’s departure: “At the outset he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the

experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part . . .” (*Pleasure Principle* 15–16). Freud tells this anecdote in the course of trying to account for repetition compulsion, the Mariner’s permanent neurosis. The principle of moral reparation, established in the Mariner’s unconscious, offers a panacea for guilt—the curse is finally snapped, and he can move forward once again.

Even after the Mariner reaches land, his identity as speaking subject is fragile, for the *procès* of his creation returns intermittently to consciousness. Even as the curse is broken, his words declare that it is only tentatively repressed. He says:

[O]nce more
I viewed the ocean green,
And looked far forth, yet little saw
Of what had else been seen. . . . (442–45)

This passage curiously unites active and passive voices; the I dimly intuits the presymbolic experience but can barely express it, doing so in the passive construction of his earlier, semiotic phase.

Though the Mariner now barely notices the horrors before him, he retains a sense of spectral persecution: he is

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread. (446–51)

Like the earlier simile describing the ship’s flight before the storm, this image concerns pursuit. But in contrast to the ship’s frantic forward motion, the movement here is deliberate. Alone, the subject refuses to look back at what he knows is behind him—at what he has already seen. What is seen is connected to what is ghostly through *spectral*, for the word’s meanings have included “[c]apable of seeing spectres,” “[h]aving the character of a spectre or phantom,” “ghostly, unsubstantial, unreal,” and even “[p]roduced

merely by the action of light on the eye or on a sensitive medium" (*OED*). The spectral is now both past (repressed) and eternally present. Turned spectral himself (as the pilot's boy confirms), the Mariner leaves the ocean forever, for his ship follows the albatross into the depths. Once the infant (the root *infans* means "incapable of speech") becomes a compulsive talker, it will never forget speech. The specters of the Mariner's past continue to pursue him and always will, for they are intrinsic to his being. His I, consisting of what his eye has seen, has defined itself in trying to escape.

An I for an Eye

If *The Rime* expresses, within the resources of the symbolic, the semiotic prehistory of a speaking subject, it follows that the narrative also provides a genealogy of the Coleridgean Imagination. As I read the poem, it traces the means by which meaning is constructed out of separation, need, fear, guilt, and a need to repair the primal break. The fragile I, to mend the break its birth necessitates, imagines a higher realm where no such gap exists. Entry into the symbolic is a creative act, for the self is thereby constituted. Though Coleridge was Romantic in taking this process as his subject, he discovers an ideology not merely Romantic, as McGann claims it was, but also patriarchal in its horrified repression of the female. In this context, Coleridge's famous definition of Imagination and his comments on the symbol appear somewhat less enigmatic. In regard to Imagination, he writes:

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former. . . . [I]t struggles to *idealize* and to *unify* [my emphases]. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (*Biographia* 1: 304)

Imagination is an active power, an agent whose perception gives it knowledge of its own

identity—of its experience of "I am," in contrast to the otherness of the fixed and dead. Cut off by definition from the material world, the "shaping spirit of Imagination" idealizes and unifies, re-creating the world in its own image (Coleridge, "Dejection" 86). The Mariner's most horrible experience is his isolation, his oneness. Perhaps Imaginative unity is most important to the Mariner in serving his desire to make everything one with him, to reestablish the preoedipal world, where there were no boundaries, where everything shared one life—which was of course his own.

Thus Imagination is defensive; the Mariner's leap into the symbolic is a reaction against the horrifying vacancy inherent in separation from the maternal and material. Coleridge's obsessive use of abstractions repeats this leap—indeed, could his fondness for philosophy and theology be a similar flight? Such a reaction also informs his definition of the symbol and underlies his privileging of the symbolic. Coleridge writes in *The Statesman's Manual* that the symbol is "the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the reality it renders intelligible" (30). This definition takes on new and ironic resonance in the light of *The Rime*, as does the meditation Coleridge recorded in 1804:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. (*Collected Notebooks* 2546)

The intuition that the symbol is somehow always already constituted within the subject is congruent with Kristeva's notion of the semiotic within the symbolic. Coleridgean Imagination seems to be fatally weakened: it exists only insofar as it is separated from what in fact is its life. This "shaping spirit" sustains itself through its self-conscious experience of its difference from the "natural," spontaneous, "feminine" force in the beyond. To the extent that Imagination is self-confident and self-absorbed, it may vanish altogether, according to its own rules. It

is thus strongest at its borders (as in the Mariner's moment of beatific vision) or in writing elegies for itself (like "Dejection: An Ode").

The Rime's great power—and readers' urge to interpret the text—lies in the poem's discovery of intense, primitive anxieties fundamental to the self. Coleridge's reply to Anna Barbauld, who complained that *The Rime* "lacked a moral," reveals his unconscious sense of this strength: the work's

only, or chief fault . . . was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of pure imagination. . . . It ought to have had no more moral than the *Arabian Nights'* tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie's son. (272–73)

These comments affirm that both the *Arabian Nights* anecdote and *The Rime* are concerned with the making of morals—with how the concept of crime and punishment rushes in as a way of ensuring order in the universe. The merchant has simply been going about his business—eating dates (i.e., passing the time?)—when the avenging father appears (out of a body of water) and announces a law that outdoes the Old Testament equity of an eye for an eye by requiring an I for an eye—the genie demands the merchant's existence in repayment. Humphry House points out that in the story as it appears in the *Arabian Nights*, the date shell kills the genie's son (90–92). Norman Fruman suggests that Coleridge's change may indicate a wish to "establish the *irrationality* of the *Arabian Nights* story" (545). In the context of my reading, however, the change signals *The Rime's* link between vision and death, the specters of speculation. Perhaps most horrible to Coleridge is the unconscious implication of this parable: that morality is a response to meaningless change and loss. Imagination defends against this knowledge. Small wonder, then, that Coleridge could not produce the discursive analysis an extended definition of Imagination demands; the Gothic

horror of *The Rime* was as close as he could come to imagining the unspeakable.

Notes

¹Max Schulz comments that McGann's essay "provides a theoretical model for reopening the poem to critical analysis . . ." (390).

²Wordsworth commented to Isabella Fenwick, "Certain parts I myself suggested:—for example, some crime was to be committed which should bring upon the old navigator, as Coleridge afterwards delighted to call him, the spectral persecution, as consequence of that crime, and his own wanderings" (360–61).

³Coleridge may owe something to Lewis's plot, however. Lewis's Wandering Jew (who cannot remain in one place more than fourteen days) interrupts Raymond de las Cisternas's "wedding" to the Bleeding Nun, who is literally a nightmare life-in-death. (Ann B. Tracy's index of Gothic motifs lists the interrupted wedding as the most frequent device in Gothics published between 1790 and 1830.)

⁴David Beres traces Coleridge's ambivalence toward the maternal, but Beres's orthodox Freudian position does not offer much insight into the motif of linguistic competence (and inadequacy) discussed by others, such as Raimonda Modiano. The Mariner proclaims a law of the father, an action suggesting that the oedipal crisis determines his identity. But the Mariner's law concerns love, which theoretically originates in the preoedipal stage.

⁵The semiotic's "vocal and gestural organization is subject to an objective *ordering* (*ordonnancement*), which is dictated by nature or socio-historical constraints such as the biological difference between the sexes or family structure" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 26–27).

⁶Coleridge's addition of the glosses in 1817 itself implies an effort to assimilate the semiotic to the symbolic. Like Kristeva's essay "*Stabat Mater*," the annotated poem juxtaposes two modes and hence exemplifies their incompatibility.

⁷See Cixous and Clément on madness and hysteria as signifiers of the repressed other.

⁸I do not imply that anything is essentially masculine or feminine. Instead, these figures already express a metonymic association derived from the earliest infantile sensations. In a patriarchal family, the infant associates the maternal and feminine with a nurturing proximity, a materiality, that the father can simply never match. The father and the masculine principle therefore connote the nonmaterial, abstract, ideal.

⁹Thus the deed also suggests the preoedipal function of the Freudian death drive: "to restore an earlier state of things" (Freud, *Pleasure Principle* 69). Kristeva argues that within the semiotic *chora* the death drive "is transversal to identity and tends to disperse 'narcissisms' whose constitution ensures the link between structures and, by extension, life. But at the same time and conversely, narcissism and pleasure are

only temporary positions from which the death drive blazes new paths . . ." (*Revolution* 241n23). The large structure of conscious identity emerges through the destruction and re-formation of earlier, inchoate narcissisms.

¹⁰The sun previously came up on the "right" (83). The association of sun, light, and right may illustrate a metonymy by which patriarchy justifies itself. If the sun is linked with the paternal (a connection established by masculine characterizations of energy and light and, in this passage in *The Rime*, by the Mariner's likening the newly risen sun to "God's own head" [97]), then when the dawn banishes the mist, the paternal pushes the traditionally feminine and maternal toward otherness. The incontestable benefits of solar warmth and light give this result the stamp of rightness.

¹¹According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of the earliest senses of *guilt* (current from the twelfth century to 1671) was "[r]esponsibility for an action or event." The placement of the albatross marks the agency of the Mariner; he is singled out. (The glossist uses "guilt" in the more familiar sense of "[t]he fact of having committed . . . some specified or implied offense," an extension of the earlier one, and assumes subjectivity in mariners and Mariner alike, since the notion of offense presupposes responsibility.)

¹²Camille Paglia argues that the Mariner is a "male heroine" who is appalled by the horrors of female nature (323–27). According to Kristeva's theory of abjection, however, horror springs from the fact of separation instead of inhering in nature, in the female, as Paglia seems to assume.

¹³Numerous critics have assumed that the Mariner unambiguously states that the blessing comes from his "kind saint." But he says, "Sure my kind saint took pity on me"—in other words, he is speculating, guessing.

¹⁴The Mariner's experience here appears to confirm Kristeva's assertion, in contrast to Melanie Klein's and D. W. Winnicott's emphasis on the centrality of the preoedipal mother, that "the father of personal pre-history" affects the child's capacity for agape, or love as metaphoric identification, as "movement toward the discernible, a journey toward the visible" ("Freud" 247). The infant responds to a triangular configuration that includes itself, the mother, and the "phallus of the father," the last item designating the mother's desire for something other than the child. The Mariner's "salvation" involves such a triangle—his I-eye, the phallic-feminine water snakes, and the moon—that also incorporates qualities associated with the masculine (motion and distance). Explicit—though metaphoric—recognition of the moon's "desire" (and the emergence of desire in the Mariner) is displaced into the famously poetic gloss: "In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon . . ." (263–71). He reads in the heavenly bodies a story about the homecoming of "lords."

¹⁵Though the Mariner must have spoken with his fellow sailors before they died, the poem records no speech among them—indeed a rather odd omission. Even the "vespers" of part 1 (76) are sung prayers (and so more semiotic than symbolic). Thus this argument demonstrates the power of the symbolic to create expectations about experience in narrative.

¹⁶The major exception is the "crimson shadows" rising from the moonlit bay (482–85). The gloss identifies them with the seraphs' "forms of light." These apparitions may be linked with the "still and awful red" of the ship's shadow (271), just before the blessing of the water snakes. The reappearance of crimson shadows from the depths brings to mind the animating life force of the lost mother repressed into the unconscious. Coleridge associates red with the female: the bride is as "[r]ed as a rose" (34), as are Life-in-Death's vampiric lips (190).

¹⁷This music is connected with that "sweet bird" the albatross. Tracing the word "sweet" through the poem appropriately reveals that a quality beginning in sensuous experience emerges as a concept: "no sweet bird did follow . . ." (88); "Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths . . ." (352); "Around, around, flew each sweet sound . . ." (354); "With their sweet jargonings" (362); "How loudly his sweet voice [the hermit] rears!" (516); "O sweeter than the marriage-feast, / 'Tis sweeter far to me, / To walk together to the kirk . . ." (601–03).

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