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Way(s) of Nature and Trans-Corporeality in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" has attracted the attention of readers and scholars for its expressive combination of natural with the supernatural. Creating the atmosphere of mystery for its use of common things with unfathomable incidents, the poem invites the reader to uncover the enigma embedded within the lines. As a unique Romantic poet, Coleridge presents the account of the ancient mariner who conveys his strange experiences and intra-action with nature in the sea. Having been burdened with the responsibility to spread his story among people, the mariner has grown to be a mediator between nature and human beings as he was the one who confronted with the grand power of nature and the intricate thread of life bringing human and non-human beings together in oneness, as a result of which he emerges to be an old man full of "wisdom" and insists to recount his story to the young generations (Williams 1116). Thus, from the perspective of New Materialism "The Ancient Mariner" displays the trans-corporeal relationships among human beings, especially the mariner, and each and any animate or inanimate being in nature and their constant intra-action in the flow of life.

Focusing on the contextual details of the poem, known as a ballad, "The Ancient Mariner" was planned to be the opening poem in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, however the ambiguous and uncanny atmosphere of the work troubled the book's first readers and left Wordsworth in worry. As McGann states Wordsworth reflects his impressions about the poem in the introduction part of *Lyrical Ballads* (qtd. in Wordsworth 36):

From what I can gather it seems that *The Ancyent Marinere* has upon the whole been an injury to the volume, I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on. If the volume should come to a second edition I would put in its place some little things which would be more likely to suit the common taste.

Further, the poem carries reminiscence of Coleridge's personal life and his aspirations of the 18th century. Firstly, it directs the readers, including Coleridge himself as he puts in his notebooks, to get the glimpses of the poet's life: "his guilt, his isolation, the loss of love, [and] the experience of opium addiction" (Miall 633). Likewise, Coleridge could not help but reflect his personal opinions and disillusionment with humanity and lost his hopes for a better future for human beings after he witnessed the collapse of the ideals of the French Revolution. Hence, in "The Ancient Mariner" he exposes the suffering of a human being, the mariner as a result of the fatal mistake he has done while the other sailors perish in the heart of nature and as a result of its wrath, which is quite similar to the state of the idealist people after the failure of the French Revolution (Kitson 197). The impact of French Revolution upon Coleridge is keenly observed in his works as he internalises and naturalises it in a new millennium when human beings have been left devoid of the paradise as Milton imagined in his *Paradise Lost*. Hence, "The Ancient Mariner" can be argued to display "the moral revolution, the necessity for which Coleridge has consistently pleaded for" (Kitson 207). Then again in this poem, Coleridge reflects his Christian and theistic beliefs concerned with nature. It might further be

referred as a work educating Western people about Christianity and being a good human being in regard to treating nature well and having faith in the oneness of everything (McGann 57).

In the same vein, as a great practitioner of Romanticism, Coleridge makes use of the German sublime which is also seen in other Romantics, especially Keats' poetry. Yet, Coleridge embraces nature as being different from the general notion of nature by Kant or Schiller for "he remains temperamentally rooted in the external world while at the same time practicing idealism in an even more refined and in some aspects more radical form than his German peers" (Tekinay 185). In "The Ancient Mariner", he generates the mariner as the speaking persona of the poem and the representative of the human beings as well as the external world whereas he also posits the vital forces of nature and most importantly, the albatross, as the prime reflection of nature causing a crisis in nature after it is killed by the mariner. However, aside from the albatross, Coleridge presents such substantial elements of nature as water, wind, sun and moon and depicts the changes in them through colour symbolism.

Principally, Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" reflects the water in an ever-changing mood. In the beginning, there is nothing but ice around the sailors. They are drifted in the icy water and they feel almost suffocated by the frosty side of nature. Likewise, the element of nature, water, frightens the sailors through the appearance and sound of icy bulk: "The ice was here, the ice was there,/The ice was all around:/ It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,/Like noises in a swound!" (I, 59-62). Then, the party of sailors come across an albatross and it heralds them to survival. However, the mariner kills the albatross for uncertain reasons, which brings about an uncanny quietness and calmness to the sea around them. After that point, they are stuck where they are without any water to drink for they have been enveloped by salty water as the mariner describes: "Water, water, every where,/And all the boards did shrink;/ Water, water, everywhere,/Nor any drop to drink" (II. 119-122).

The element of water gets more and more threatening as well as alarming for the sailors and the mariner, as a result of which the other sailors perish under the curse of nature. To display the discontentment of natural forces, it sheds a frightening, fervent colour of red. It is only after a painful process of redemption that the agony of the mariner ceases, the rain relieves him and the ship starts moving and ushers him to the way home. Thus, it might be suggested that water as a vital element of nature punishes and then pardons the mariner for the grave mistake he has committed through the ways of nature, the moody tides or the lack of tides and changing colours.

Then again, the natural force of wind is presented in the likewise manner by Coleridge. As the mariner recounts, in the beginning he and his sailor friends are caught in the still, icy waters and the wind takes them to the south, to freezing locations. Yet, after the ship is drifted away from the icy waters and the mariner kills the bird, the wind reflects the wrath of nature: "And soon I heard a roaring wind:/ It did not come anear;/ But with its sound it shook the sails,/ That were so thin and sere" (V, 310-314). Within these lines, the power of nature is emphasised while the human-made ship remains so tiny in the face of great winds. The wind also serves as the voice and spirit of nature as the mariner hears whispers originating from the sea and caressing his body in the later parts of the poem. "But soon there breathed a wind on me, / Nor sound nor motion made" (VI, 453-4). Therefore, both the existence and the absence of the wind forge a problem for human beings as it is firstly in the form of an unwelcome storm and later, the lack of wind is also ill-omened (Mahmutovic 97).

The latter case is clearly seen in the lines “We stuck, nor breath nor motion” and “that silent sea” (II, 106-116).

As with the reflection of moon in the poem, it is also quite significant for it produces the tide in the sea and it is further symbolical for its state and the colour of its beams. It first glimmers in white just before the mariner shoots the albatross (I, 78). Yet, once the bird is dead, nature sends a curse through the element of nature and as seen in the reflection of the moon. It is “horned” and “star-dogg’d” which might be interpreted as the fury of nature reflected in the shape of horns (III, 211-3). Subsequent to his suffering, the mariner comes to an understanding with nature and notices the creatures in the water reflecting moonlight are indeed “happy living things” (IV, 283). So, moonlight is the medium that the mariner understands the balance in nature and that everything has a function in life. He perceives that every intricate thing in the universe, both humans and non-human beings, is a part of a larger harmonious system, as Iovino expresses in her ecocritical remarks:

The idea of the interplay of physical substances (whether natural or human-made) and biological bodies sheds light on the unpredictability of causal lines, and on the impossibility of delineating a clear-cut boundary between life-forms and other material entities: even what is not recognizable as “alive” acts and has effects. (139)

Also, moon is the counterpart of the sun at night, which also calls forth Christian belief, illumination and innate goodness. It is observed in the mariner’s associating the moon with “Mary Queen” and “Heaven” (V, 296). Further, moonlight is the symbol of imagination for both Coleridge and Wordsworth (Perkins 434). Lastly, Coleridge attributes a feminine quality to the moon as the counterpart of the sun and addresses it as “she”: “[s]oftly she was going up, / And a star or two beside---” (IV, 266-7). The feminisation of the moon bears ecocritical arguments as the Mother Earth nourishes and provides for human beings and the luminous moon delivers light at night, guides people and even inspires them like a mother figure.

Finally, Coleridge describes the sun in different colours based on the actions of the human beings in the poem. At the outset, it is given in detail as it rises from the west and shines brightly. However, after the albatross is killed, it rises from the east, which shows that the ship has been dragged to another direction and it does not shine anymore: “The Sun now rose upon the right:/Out of the sea came he,/Still hid in mist, and on the left/ Went down into the sea”(II, 83-87). Afterwards, it adapts into different colours because of the murder of the bird and it is depicted as “[a]ll in a hot and copper sky, / The bloody Sun, at noon” (II, 111-2). Nevertheless, upon the repentance of the mariner’s from his sin and great misdeed, the sun starts beaming its true and bright colours again. It has been purified from the anger of nature for the murder of the albatross. As a final word, the sun is called as “he” for it is the counterpart of the moon and also it has likewise connotations both in Christian belief and the Greek mythology.

With the same token, from the vantage point of New Materialism, or in other words, the intra-action of human beings with non-human beings, namely the Ancient Mariner with the albatross and other constituents of nature and the depiction of how myriad of entities in the world are all connected to one another in an ever-continuous trans-corporeal relationship is the pivotal point of this study. This green perspective can further be clarified in Iovino and Oppermann’s words about nature-human relationship:

Material ecocriticism invites us into a polyphonic story of the world that includes the vital materiality of life, experiences of nonhuman

entities, and our bodily intra-actions with all forms of material agency as effective actors. (88)

Herewith, triggered with the faulty actions of a human being, the crisis and rage of nature reminds the mariner as well as the readers how vulnerable and vital the balance of nature is. After the processes of suffering and the recognition of the fault which ends in eventual repentance, the order of nature is restored along with the intuitive perception of the mariner. In the poem, Coleridge's main focus is not the "blest future", but it is rather the process involving "the punishment of mankind by natural forces", so as to present a moral in terms of intra-active and trans-corporeal connections among all beings (Kitson 201).

To begin with, albatross is not only a companion for sailors showing them the way out in the sea but it is also the reflection of the harmony, benevolence and interconnection of all entities and the symbol of love. Although the imagery of the sun and ice appears to be cold, static and forbidding in the mariner's observation at first, with the emergence of albatross as an ambassador of peace between nature and humans, the harmonious interaction is forged. The sailors are guided and helped on their way by the albatross during which the white colour of the moon pervades the scenery. Yet, the human beings show no gratitude to nature insomuch that the mariner is unable to maintain the peaceful interaction with nature along with the "One Life" and he inevitably kills the bird. Hence, "[t]he crime must be looked at symbolically as a crime against nature, therefore ultimately being a crime against the Mariner's own being, since he is part of the unity that he unjustly attacks", which draws the attention to oneness of all beings and their intra-action (Bal 35-6).

Reflecting his conscience, the guilty remarks the mariner utters upon the murder of the divine bird are rather significant in a likewise manner: "[i]nstead of the cross, the Albatross / About my neck was hung" (II, 141-2). The lines suggest religious interpretation as it is also a sin to kill an innocent being in Christian belief. Further, the way the albatross is hung on the mariner's neck turns it into the figure of Christ, who was sacrificed for the sins of human beings. Further, the shooting of albatross is associated with the original sin (Perkins 434). Therefore, the albatross is avenged by nature in a short while with the "silence of the sea", the "bloody sun" and the lack of wind (I, 110-2). The extreme and unnatural qualities of nature are introduced as a punishment to the mariner and the ones accompanying him (Mahmutovic 100). So, he regards nature and sea creatures with guilty conscience:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
 That ever this should be!
 Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
 Upon the slimy sea.
 About, about, in reel and rout
 The death-fires danced at night;
 The water, like a witch's oils,
 Burnt green, and blue and white. (II, 123-130)

In Part IV, the mariner depicts the world through his own eyes. "As materiality forces itself on the mariners' notice and a sense of spatiality begins to emerge, the world becomes increasingly complex" (Williams 1121). It is a new concept that he has not yet heard of or

realised which is related to the trans-corporeality of bodies referring that there are no bodily boundaries, rather there is oneness in which whatever happens to an entity of nature has an impact upon the other members of the same planet. In other words, Iovino denotes that “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ and ‘environment’” (qtd. in Alaimo 238). Unable to catch the glimpse of the hidden messages behind the natural happenings, the mariner further feels abandoned and miserable within the raging nature: “Alone, alone, all, all, alone,/ Alone on a wide wide sea!/ And never a saint took pity on/ My soul in agony” (IV, 232-235). Left alone in the sea with the dead bodies of his fellow sailors for seven days and seven nights, he finally sees the moon come out and comes to an appreciation of the marine creatures. He eventually realises the beauty in the terrifying sea creatures and sees the light they are shedding in water and appreciates the variety of colours they are offering:

Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watched the water-snakes:
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.
Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of goldenfire. (IV, 272-82)

It is a turning point in the mariner’s punishment because he has now come to terms with the intra-active relationship of human beings and nature in which non-human beings are as important, essential and full of harmony as human beings are. As the mariner regards the vitality and beauty of sea creatures, it is convenient to recall Iovino and Oppermann’s remarks upon the interconnection between marine life and human life in which they underline “[...] the permeable boundaries between marine creatures and human subjects. The sea, as a pulsating nonhuman agent, functions as a vital force [...] calls attention to the agential assemblages of nature’s magnificent forces” (81).

Moreover, after the moment of appreciating nature, the mariner is freed from nature’s curse upon him as seen in his lines: “And from my neck so free / The Albatross fell off, and sank / Like lead into the sea” (290-2). The release from the curse not only ushers the mariner towards survival but guides him to discover his own inward stability through the awareness of the harmonious system and stability of nature. He redeems through contemplation of the “divine in natural landscape” (Kitson 202). Only through his recognition of the natural balance that the mariner has been able to see the real charms of nature as he finally stares at “the ocean green” (VI, 446). After all, the mariner further understands that there is a different side of the “nature of truth” generated by the “fixed and external operations of the [human] mind” (Perlis 169). In other words, the knowledge of nature embracing human and non-human beings all the same shatters the long-set humanist notions of culture being superior to nature.

In conclusion, Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" underscores the value of nature for all kinds of life and presents the exemplary story of the mariner caught in the action of destroying nature as a lesson to all human beings. In Coleridge's depiction of a raging but eventually gracious nature, the mariner is finally led to survival after he recognises his fault and redeems. At this point, the study ends with Carolyn Merchant's sensible proposition about the preservation of natural life interconnected to cultural life:

I develop an ethic of earthcare based on the concept of a partnership between people and nature. . . . Nature is real, active, and alive. Human beings. . . are also real, active, autonomous beings. . . . Nature . . . has the potential to destroy human lives and to continue to evolve and develop with or without human beings. Humans, who have the power to destroy non-human nature and potentially themselves through science and technology, must exercise care and restraint by allowing nature's beings the freedom to continue to exist, while still acting to fulfill basic human material and spiritual needs. An earthcare ethic . . . is generated by humans, but is enacted by listening to, hearing, and responding to the voice of nature. A partnership ethic then emerges as a guide to practice.(xix)

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