

The Catastrophic Global Order in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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Abstract

British Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's celebrated poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798, 1814) narrates the shipwreck and survival of a globetrotting mariner set against a backdrop of ghastly supernatural forces. The plot revolves around the mariner's arbitrary killing of a sea-bird and his subsequent chastisement on the seas by otherworldly spirits, eventually generating a form of survivor's trauma in the mariner to narrate his strange tale compulsively.

Influential modern interpretations of the poem have cast it as a narrative of sin and redemption, or crisis and regeneration, centered on the individual soul and moral action. In light of recent studies on travel and geography in the British Romantic period, however, this paper seeks to situate the poem within the material context of the imperial world order and to reexamine its global reach. I argue that the poem embodies profound anxieties of empire and the forms of navigation that make possible the expansion of empire. As such, the poem can be read as an allegory of the new global order in the early nineteenth century, in which the heady growth of the British Empire is already perceived as unstable and tainted, foreboding unknown and unnatural forms of disaster and catastrophe. The supernatural machinery in the poem is thus crucial to imagining scenarios of impending collapse of the world order; the mariner's guilt and trauma represent on a global scale the rupture and alienation from the natural order when imposed upon by British imperial geography.

Literary narratives of disaster and catastrophe – whether fictional or inspired by real events – offer revealing glimpses into the writer's tragic imagination as well as the collective anxieties and apprehensions of a historical period. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798, 1817), one of the most celebrated narrative poems of the British Romantic period, has perennially fascinated readers by its eerie, supernatural plot and its strange literary power that seems at once archaic and modern. The plot centers on a loony, old sailor who mesmerizes a wedding guest and forces him to listen to a strange narrative: the mariner tells of a sea voyage in which he senselessly kills a sea-bird and is thereafter haunted by a host of malignant supernatural forces; after much penance and suffering, the mariner finally returns to his own country but is doomed to repeat his tale compulsively. On the most rudimentary level, the narrative is about a supernatural catastrophe at sea and its traumatic aftermath as experienced by an individual traveler; I shall also argue that the poem expresses a

deep-rooted unease concerning the global order established under British naval and imperial expansion. The catastrophic sea voyage is allegorical of a global order that is haunted by unknowable forces and prone to unpredictable disaster.

Traditional interpretations of the poem have focused predominantly on its Christian context and seen it as “a myth of guilt and redemption” about the individual soul (Bowra 71). Robert Penn Warren, representative of this line of thinking, insists that the poem teaches the doctrine of the “One Life” in which all creation partakes, and the doctrine of the creative imagination. I would read the poem as a narrative of catastrophe in a divergent metaphoric and symbolic sense: as a meditation on the crisis of western modernity and its submerged other, the specter of colonized lands and peoples, both of which constitute the global order of imperial expansion. My argument will be twofold: first, that “The Rime” embodies symptoms of maritime expansion and colonial guilt; second, that the poem functions as an etiology of the malaises of occi-

dental modernity. These two aspects of the poem are linked inexorably – which is to say that the advent of the condition of occidental modernity is irrevocably bound up with imperial expansion and its exploitation of the other.

Nearly half a century ago, William Empson remarked that the poem “appeals to a proud national tradition and evokes a major historical event, the maritime expansion of the Western Europeans” (297). Decades before Empson, John Livingston Lowes had definitively shown in his exhaustive source study, *The Road to Xanadu*, that Coleridge had read and absorbed contemporary and historical captains’ reports which found their way – sometimes verbatim – into the poem. For instance, the narratives of Captain James Cook (1728-1779), the famed explorer who undertook three legendary voyages to the Pacific, provided Coleridge with the images of the phosphorescent water snakes and the visceral horrors of shipwreck. As the authors of a recent study of British and European exploration in the period remind us, the act of “exploration” is never scientifically objective but must be seen as “a social and political construct, one that is bound up with the history of imperialism” (Fulford 3). Regardless of whether each voyage had a direct colonial impact, the act of navigating, mapping, and charting unknown regions of the world cannot be an innocent endeavor, entwined as it is with the imperial drive to knowledge, or the desire for instrumental reason – the rationalist reduction of the world as a means to a given end.

Within the poem, the actual course of the ship’s voyage deserves attention. Departing from England, the ship sails south, crosses the equator, and is thence borne by a storm into the glacial regions of the South Pole:

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

And through the drifts the snowy clifts
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—
The ice was all between.

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!⁽¹⁾ (51-62)

Besides the obvious change in climate, the seascape takes on a phantasmagoric quality as the lighting turns unnatural and the explorer becomes lost in the undifferentiated saturation of the single element of ice. The sounds that echo from the ice are menacing because of their dreamy unreality, creating a nightmarish effect. In terms of cartography, the region may be seen as an inversion of imperial knowledge – an area devoid of human interest or identity, useless in its lack of instrumentality, and composed of both solidity and flux, which makes it resistant to any enterprise of mapping. Fulford convincingly argues that “The Rime” is ultimately “a poem about polar exploration” in which “the southern sea becomes the uncanny polar opposite of the safe harbor of his home; a place where self-identity is challenged and perceptions are altered” (172-73). Indeed, what makes the scene so terrifying to the mariner is also the anxiety of the European traveler’s rational identity, which is threatened by the lack of differentiation in the landscape and the sheer difficulty of defining oneself against the unknowable region.

In the voyage, the equator emerges as the horizon of crisis – most of the narrative’s disasters occur near or at the tropical zone, and venturing out into sea does not pose a problem until the ship encounters the equator. Coleridge’s marginal gloss in the 1817 edition reads: “The Mariner tells how the ship sailed southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the line” (25). The earlier 1798 edition makes the point more saliently in the “Argument” prefaced to the poem: “How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by Storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole... and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Marinere came back to his own Country.” The “line” is significant for it demarcates the main extent of the British Empire from the then unfamiliar and un-colonized territories, and designates the threshold of imperial knowledge. To cross the equator is to venture beyond the established bounds of empire, and the catastrophes in many ways reflect this anxiety. (A few exceptions contemporaneous to the poem: New South Wales was only recently established as a British penal colony in 1788; Cape Town became a British colony in 1806). In a more

speculative vein, American philosopher Stanley Cavell reads the equator in the poem as “an implied image of a mental line to be crossed that is interpreted as a geographical or terrestrial border” (46). Cavell draws an analogy between the equatorial horizon and Kantian epistemology as “a line below which... experience, hence knowledge, cannot, and must not presume to, penetrate” (47). He further makes the bold suggestion that “the initiating act of transgression – that which for me evokes the Fall – is the act of ‘crossing the line’” (57). Even before the mariner commits the prime transgression of shooting the albatross, he is in a sense already fallen. For Cavell, that Fall is a crisis in western epistemology concerning consciousness and skepticism that the mariner attempts to confront when he ventures beyond the equatorial point into the unknown, and this journey symbolizes a Fall into the knowledge and self-consciousness of modern existence. In my reading, this skeptical moment of attempting to penetrate beyond Kantian epistemology coincides precisely with the explorer’s plunge into possible colonial realms of instrumental value to the imperial project.

After the mariner’s killing of the albatross at the South Pole, the ship drifts back north through the Pacific. Coleridge makes the path explicit in the 1817 gloss: “The fair breeze continues; the ship enters the Pacific Ocean and sails northward, even till it reaches the Line” (103). The poem is also unambiguous about the mariner’s expedition into a brave new world, yielding the famous lines: “We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea” (105-6). The new expedition into the Pacific brings another round of catastrophes. The wind abruptly stops, leaving the ship stranded in the unforgiving tropical climate: “All in a hot and copper sky, / The bloody Sun, at noon” (111-12). The ship comes to a standstill in the famous lines, “As idle as a painted Ship / Upon a painted Ocean” (117-18). The equatorial line signifies a halting place, a midpoint between the colonized and uncolonized realms at which the entire project of exploration must be reckoned with; the result of that reckoning is a kind of unreal stasis, as if the global order constructed through instrumental planning were a mere illusion.

In order to cross the threshold back into the familiar hemisphere of the homeland, the mariner and his crew must undergo a series of punishing purgatorial acts. As Alan Bewell has demonstrated, these terrors

are reminiscent of colonial disease and death in the slave trade. Bewell perceptively observes that the Mariner “undergoes a symbolic ‘blackening’ throughout the poem” (103). The wedding guest describes the mariner’s appearance as “long, and lank, and brown, / As is the ribbed sea-sand” (226-27). There is no doubt that the mariner’s skin has been scorched by the sun, but it is also possible that he is being seen metonymically as a complicit figure in the British slave trade. The two ghastly figures that appear on a ghost ship, named “Death” and “Life-in-Death,” have the appearance of a black slave and a prostitute – signaling common diseases in the colonies: leprosy and syphilis. The two figures play a game of dice, at which Life-in-Death wins the mariner, and Death wins his crew. The mariner looks on in horror as his two hundred shipmates proceed to drop dead one by one, cursing him with their eyes. The mariner is reduced to a pathetic state of alienation and desperation: “Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide Sea” (232-33). The external world and the expedition voyage have been contaminated by decay and decomposition:

I looked upon the rotting sea,
And drew my eyes away;
I looked upon the rotting deck,
And there the dead men lay. (240-43)

As Bewell argues, “‘The Rime’ powerfully suggests how far colonial disease and death were understood as fitting retribution for the crime against nature (both human and natural) implicit in colonialism” (107). The human costs of expedition, empire, and the slave trade are compressed into the graphic image of the phantasmal ship, the alienated mariner, and the diseased and rotting dead bodies strewn about him. This is underlined even after the mariner’s supposed redemption, when the dead bodies are reanimated and continue their labor in zombie-like fashion:

The mariners all ’gan work the ropes,
Where they were wont to do:
They raised their limbs like lifeless tools –
We were a ghastly crew. (341-44)

In a way, the spectral image is a reflection of colonial labor in real life, which reduces human beings into

automatons in service of the empire-building project. Their bodies have literally become “tools,” existing solely for their utility and efficiency in the modern capitalist West. The geography of “The Rime” is such that the West/non-West distinction is restructured as a northern/southern hemispheric division of colonization; likewise, the natural/supernatural difference in the poem is collapsed in its critique of modern instrumentality. The mariner, the dead shipmates, and the supernatural beings “Death” and “Life-in-Death” all coincide and constitute parts of the systemic global order.

The crux of the poem revolves around the killing of a seabird for no satisfactory reason; that unexplained act is the turning point in the plot that brings about all the suffering and penance that the Mariner must undergo. William Wordsworth, Coleridge’s close collaborator at the time of the poem’s composition, relates the incident’s genesis during a walking tour:

In the course of this walk was planned the poem of the “Ancient Mariner,” founded on a dream, as Mr. Coleridge said, of his friend Mr. Cruikshank... I [Wordsworth] had been reading in Shelvocke’s Voyages, a day or two before, that, while doubling Cape Horn, they frequently saw albatrosses in that latitude, the largest sort of sea-fowl, some extending their wings twelve or thirteen feet.

(Wordsworth 107-8)

The albatross appears to the ship at the South Pole, and is hailed by the secluded crew as if it were a “Christian soul” (65); “And every day, for food or play, / Came to the Mariner’s hollo!” (73-74). But the mariner, with an undisclosed motive, kills it: “With my cross-bow / I shot the Albatross” (81-82). This unexplained action has taken on central importance in nearly all interpretations of the poem. Perhaps we might begin with Coleridge’s own gloss on these lines in the 1817 version, which reads: “The ancient Mariner inhospitably kills the pious bird of good omen” (79). “Inhospitably” is the key word here, pointing toward ideas of neighborliness, reciprocation, and communal interchange. In the context of exploration that I have been sketching out, the albatross represents the exotic, the foreign, the indigenous, the unknown: the other of the European traveler. Noting Coleridge’s activist interest in the slave trade and his reading in

slave narratives, J. R. Ebbatson provocatively argues that “the shooting of the albatross may be a symbolic rehearsal of the crux of colonial expansion, the enslavement of native peoples” (198). The explorer is welcomed with hospitality but necessarily violates that good will as a consequence of the imperial system in which he is complicit. The shooting of the albatross, in this line of argument, is a symbolic act bound to occur in the explorer’s reification of global order.

I want to conclude by speculating on the implications concerning modernity that the killing of the albatross represents. One way of viewing the act in a philosophical context is to take recourse to the notion of the Fall and Coleridge’s theory of the Will. If the killing is seen as a reenactment of the Fall and the perpetration of Original Sin, then the mariner’s lack of motive can be taken as the intractable, obdurate exercise of human will without regard to divine injunctions. Yet Coleridge conceives of the human will as a reflection of the divine by virtue of its absolute freedom: “The Will, the absolute Will, is that which is essentially causative of reality, essentially, and absolutely, that is, boundless from without and within. This is our first principle” (*Opus Maximum* 220). For Coleridge, the Will lies outside the objective world of causality as a mysterious, transcendent, and absolute principle, which, like the Imagination, creates reality instead of being dictated by it. The mariner’s motiveless killing is thus representative of the *absoluteness* of the Will that eludes and transcends all causal principles. The mariner violates the natural order through an absolute revelation of the Will, and subsequently, by the mysterious act of grace, is reconciled with the divine order – thus mirroring the Christian progress of Fall and Redemption.

What this view neglects is a sense of the larger forces at work at the secular horizon of the poem’s historical moment, which reflects not so much theological beliefs as the continuing crises of modernity. Stanley Cavell, for instance, takes issue with the poem as an allegory of the Fall. “Rather on the contrary,” Cavell argues, “I take it to provide an explanation of why it fits the Fall, that is, of what the Fall itself is an allegory of” (48). For Cavell, the Fall is an allegory of philosophical skepticism in the light of Kantian epistemology; historically, the Fall may also be an allegory of the modern reduction of consciousness into a tool of empirical and methodical observation. This reduc-

tion takes its form in instrumental rationality, which reifies and objectifies the world, compounding into a crisis in modernity. As Thomas Pfau perceptively remarks of the poem, "the true catastrophe of Modernity lies in its unconditionally espousing a means/end model of rationality as the sole way of being in the world" (980). The crisis in the imperial global order is concurrent with the larger catastrophe of modernity, just as the mariner's journey of exploration and the killing of the albatross are connected with an inexorable historical logic. The mariner inhabits the brave new world of modernity and disenchantment, in which motive or intention is depicted as absent. The "senselessness" or meaninglessness of the killing signifies the necessary demise of the bond between human beings and nature; nature appears as a purely instrumental *thing* to be explored and violated. The expedition itself is a symptom of this malaise of modernity, and the violence perpetrated on nature is a manifestation of the rationalist ideology latent in the sea voyage. The poem leaves one with the sense that modernity itself is a state of catastrophe, and that the mariner's continued guilt and penance is the price one must pay for modernity.

NOTE

- (1) Quotations from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are cited by line numbers and taken from the 1817 edition unless otherwise noted.

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