“My Soul in Agony”: Irrationality and Christianity in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

As famously described in Biographia Literaria, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s remit in the Lyrical Ballads was to bring a naturalistic edge to the supernatural:

the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real.¹

However, if The Rime brings supernatural terrors into a convincing naturalistic setting, then this “dramatic truth” is a troubling mixture. Insofar as its weird events seem to overrule the rational order associated with naturalism, then we can identify the poem as part of a Todorovian fantastic, suspended between explicable and inexplicable causality.² This suspension, putting its reader in an interpretative hiatus, does not seem to be one that critics have appreciated: the piece has been dismissed frequently as deranged and incoherent.

Thus, an anonymous 1798 writer for the Analytical Review argued that the poem had “more of the extravagance of a mad German poet, than of the simplicity of our ancient ballad writers.”³ The reference to Germany is less straightforward in Robert Southey’s “a Dutch attempt at German sublimity.”⁴ Here, as David Chandler has valuably shown, Southey had a genuine interest in the German ballad tradition, and it was the obscurity and unintelligibility of a “Dutch” rendering of a narrative that was at

Despite this difference, Southey shares with the *Analytical Review* a feeling that the poem is irrational, and bridles at its supposed unintelligibility. Yet in a fulsome review by John Gibson Lockhart for *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1819, the poem’s very irrationality is considered to be its greatest quality:

> it is a poem to be felt, cherished, mused upon, not to be talked about, not capable of being described, analyzed, or criticised. It is the wildest of all the creations of genius . . . its images have the beauty, the grandeur, the incoherence of some mighty vision. The loveliness and the terror glide before us in turns.6

This fantasticality, this Dutch-ness, this incoherent grandeur—noted from the start by Coleridge’s contemporaries—must be pursued by any analysis of the poem. As an unfolding of the poem’s critical history will illustrate, the enigmatic nature of the protagonist, action and meaning has drawn interpreter after interpreter into an etiology of this irrational aspect. Compelling and disturbing in equal measure, as Lockhart perceptively notes, the standing of the poem is predicated to some extent on our inability to understand it, and its cultural centrality on its very strangeness.

What I intend to do in this article is as follows. In the first half, I shall resurvey perhaps the central and most established critical question surrounding the poem: whether it provides a coherent moral order or whether its irrationality outstrips such an order. In doing so, I broadly affirm the latter position. However, in the second half, I shall argue that while it is common to portray the text’s irrationality as the failure of a Christian moral order, in fact we can find the most convincing explanation for this irrationality within the poem’s Christianity. This irrationality lies with the doctrine of original sin, which was a horrifying barbarism for Unitarianism and which remained a religious mystery resistant to explication even in Coleridge’s later thought. By putting forward such a reading, I am overturning a long-standing critical position which sees Christianity in the poem as bound more or less absolutely to its ultimate unity, harmony and moral explicability. By contrast, I argue that, for Coleridge, original sin brings a new form of awful but compelling self-knowledge. In the wake of the collapse
of the optimistic and perfectible Unitarian model of subjectivity found in poems like “The Destiny of Nations” and “Religious Musings,” Coleridge presents us with a subject that is, at its root, unable to come to terms with itself.

The Cross and the Albatross: Christianity, Irrationality and the Mariner’s Crime

From the very moment the ship drops—a word with a definite emotional valence—below the human structures of kirk and lighthouse, there is a sense that the crew are falling into a realm where things begin to lose their sense. The ice fields that Lawrence Kramer perceptively reads as daemonic spaces of “perceptual blankness” are a region where orientation becomes confused: “The Ice was here, the Ice was there, / The Ice was all around” (57–58). Moreover, the passage beyond the range of lighthouse and church sets up a certain equivalence between physical and spiritual security and estrangement, confirmed as the albatross watches over the ceremonies of “vespers nine” (74). The Roman Catholic vespers, like the Anglican equivalent of Evensong, involved heavily penitential elements and Coleridge would have been particularly familiar with the Anglican general confession: “Almighty and most merciful Father; we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.” The vespers in The Rime would therefore have been a plea for safety, and the weird seas pictured by Coleridge are indeed spaces where one becomes lost, where one errs and strays: “For days and weeks it play’d us freaks— / Like Chaff we drove along” (47–48).

Thus, from the outset a relatively realistic travel narrative is contaminated by strangeness: fantastic, as we have already suggested, or uncanny in the sense Freud gave it. It is within this already disoriented field that the crucial moment of the narrative occurs: the slaying of the albatross. There are two especially strange elements to this killing. Firstly, as many critics have pointed out, it happens without any apparent foresight or motive. In one stanza, the Mariner is describing vespers in the moonlight; in the next, the Wedding Guest is shocked by the terror in the Mariner’s face: the killing simply happens. This is particularly interesting given the weight that the Unitarian moral theory to which Coleridge subscribed at the time placed upon motives, since the determinative effects of motives were, in

8. References to Coleridge’s poetry are taken from The Complete Poems, ed. William Keach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997) and are cited by line number. Initially, I shall be working from the 1798 text.
9. The Book of Common Prayer (London: John Jarvis, 1791), B6', in Eighteenth Century Collections Online (Gale Group), CW12358033, galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO.
their compatibilist analysis of volition, the only marks of responsibility. Moreover, after the killing, it seems that barely anything has been changed. Coleridge begins the next segment of the poem by repeating an already met image of the sun metronomically rising and falling, while “the good south wind still blew behind” (85, my emphasis). Nature seems curiously unmoved by something that has been read often as a crime against it. This is entirely appropriate as, in the original 1798 version, unaided by Coleridge’s glosses, there is no initial reason to believe that the killing of the albatross has set in motion any clear sequence of events whatsoever.

We can see this reflected in the sailors’ own reactions. At first, the crew believe the bird had brought the wind, and turn upon the Mariner for destroying a creature of good fortune. When the fog clears, however, they swiftly change their opinion and believe “’Twas right . . . such birds to slay / That bring the fog and mist” (97–98). This response has been seized on in some interpretations. For instance, Graham Davidson holds that the sailors are superstitious, entrapped in a slavish adherence to empirical signs, and require a more Christian, sacramental understanding of nature. Yet this is a rather harsh judgment. While Coleridge has already ominously gestured to the reader that the killing was some form of terrifying transgression (through the reaction of the Wedding Guest), what the bird represents is still at this stage very unclear. The albatross appeared, it was hailed, and it was killed. Apart from its haunting presence at vespers, which itself could be protective, malign or perhaps even arbitrary, the albatross seems to have no obvious moral or religious significance.

Thus, the death of the albatross is a powerful but initially unintelligible event. It refuses to fit into the narrative immediately before and after: we do not know why the Mariner killed it, and, certainly at this point, we do not know what such a killing meant. Nevertheless, it becomes rapidly apparent that, although the import of the crime is confused, it is a crime:

Ah wel-a-day! what evil looks
Had I from old and young;
Instead of the Cross the Albatross
About my neck was hung.

(135–38)

Yet even this image seems massively overdetermined. Is the Mariner a Christ-like figure, and if so in what sense? Or, perhaps, the Mariner and the albatross are some form of disturbing inversion of the crucifixion? The

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An allusive internal rhyme that links the cross and the albatross creates an enigmatic pattern of significance, not one that is easily deciphered.

If the relationship between the cross and albatross is unreadable, it reflects a wider ambiguity in the relations between the supernatural events of the poem and orthodox religion. The order against which the Mariner has offended does seem to be encompassed by a broadly theistic ontology. Certainly, the Mariner interprets events through his Roman Catholic faith and appeals insistently to Christ, the cross, Mary and so forth. One could speculate that the archaic diction might be a way of suggesting that the Mariner is an unsophisticated, unreliable narrator, e.g., “To Mary-queen the praise be yeven” (286), and some critics have suggested he is unfit to interpret his own experience. Nevertheless, insofar as the events of the poem can be trusted at all, they do seem to suggest a broad Christian framework.

For example, the sleepless agony—one of the central trials undergone by the Mariner—is broken by the ability to pray. While one may query the Mariner’s interpretation of the event—“sure my kind saint took pity on me” (278)—the fact that the curse involves an inability to pray, and is lifted by the making of prayer, is incontrovertible. Similarly, unless we are to dismiss the coming of the two spirits merely as hallucination, they also seem to confirm a Christian context, defining the Mariner’s experience as penance and identifying the Mariner “By him who died on cross” (404). Finally, the demand made by the Christian hermit to “say / What manner man art thou?” (609–10) seems to have an indisputable effect on the narrative by setting up the strange catharsis of the tale-telling. This would also suggest that Christian ministry, and the authority invested in Christian holy men, have a certain privilege within the poem.

Nevertheless, although the broad context of the Mariner’s ordeal seems framed in Christian terms, much of the detail is ominously ambiguous, once again creating a suspension between the familiar and unfamiliar. Christian readings are seriously troubled by the ambiguity of these elements. The fearsome sun could be a providential sign, in the same way that the sun of freedom rises in blood at the end of “The Destiny of Nations.” Or, the ambiguous like could be read so as to displace theistic forces, rendering the monstrous sun as an alternative godhead, i.e. like a deity, but not the Christian one: “Ne dim ne red, like God’s own head, / The glorious sun uprist” (93–94). Similarly, the horrifying animation of the waters provokes a Christian oath in line 119, and yet seems to belong to a non-Christian, pagan mythology:

About, about, in reel and rout
The Death-fires danc’d at night;
The water, like a witch’s oils,
Burnt green and blue and white.

(123–26)

These portents of a less-than-Christian world are merely preparatory, however, when compared to the poem’s gothic centerpiece: the appearance of the spectral ship. The sun, previously compared to God’s head, is now transfigured into a ghastly face:

And strait the Sun was fleck’d with bars
(Heaven’s mother send us grace)
As if thro’ a dungeon grate he peer’d
With broad and burning face.

(169–72)

Out of this chilling optical illusion comes the eerie vessel itself, manned by two hideous, spectral figures. Raimonda Modiano has suggested that Coleridge’s inventive gothic imagery often seems to overpower the Christian backdrop of the poem, and this spectral vessel would surely be a central example of her point.13 Yet the episode is not troubling only in its imagery. Given the references to hulks and dungeons, the mood of the passage is suitably punitive, but if the spectral ship does represent the coming of a judgment, it is an irrational and apparently capricious one. The dice game hardly seems appropriate as an instrument of Christian providence:

The naked Hulk alongside came
And the Twain were playing dice;
“The Game is done! I’ve won, I’ve won!”
Quoth she, and whistled thrice.

(191–94)

What kind of game is this? The victory of the enigmatic female figure, mysteriously described as “far liker Death” (189) than her skeletal, male companion, is claimed under a “hornèd Moon” (202). Moreover, the curses rendered by the Mariner’s ship-mates—which seem to be the result of the outcome of the dice game—are made by this sign, suggesting it holds a central place in explicating the significance of this part of the narrative. Unfortunately, like so many of the apparently sense-bearing objects already discussed, the hornèd moon is yet another enigma. In the rest of the poem, moonlight seems to accompany God’s possible presence, as in the vespers.

service (76) or when the Mariner returns home (479). By contrast, it here seems diabolical, once again raising questions about the relations between these weird forces and those of the Christian God.

A final irrationality, and challenge to any Christian reading, lies in the apparently inexpiable nature of the crime. It appears on numerous occasions as if the Mariner may have finally fulfilled the terms of his punishment. Most notably, he blesses the water-snakes and the terrors of his persecution seem replaced and absolved by a sudden apprehension of beauty. This is certainly interpreted by the Mariner as a moment of release:

Oh happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gusht from my heart,
And I bless'd them unaware!

(274–77)

This passage is often cited in one life interpretations that believe the killing of the albatross was an act of hostility to nature, and the blessing is an act of reconciliation with nature.14 However, it is barely halfway through the poem, and it is not long before the Mariner is overcome by stifling fear yet again, “[quaking] to think of my own voice / How frightful it would be” (337–38). Like other passages of beauty (e.g. the pastoral music of 339–61, and the homecoming of 457–80) it seems to offer only temporary relief, and is menaced by a juxtaposition with terror.

The homecoming, in particular, seems to provide a problematic lack of resolution if the poem is to be Christianized. The sweet “meadow-gale” (462) blowing from the Mariner’s homeland immediately follows a vivid, paranoid stanza describing

one, that on a lonely road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turn’d round, walks on
And turns no more his head:
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

(451–56)

These are hardly the words of a man who has been fully released from guilt and debt. As the Mariner himself remarks of the breeze: “it mingled strangely with my fears” (463). Those fears never leave him, and insistently throughout the poem terror cannot be exorcized. Red light, initially asso-
ciated with the bloody sun, recurs a number of times through the poem as an image of guilt and terror. As late as the return to the harbor, the vision of a beautiful moonlit sea is broken by rising crimson flames, and Coleridge adds a typically ghastly touch as the Mariner is suddenly horrified by the blood-red gleam on his own skin:

A little distance from the prow
Those dark-red shadows were;
But soon I saw that my own flesh
Was red as in a glare.

(485–88)

The dark-red shadows cannot be escaped, any more than the repeated reanimations of the crew, or the curse of their dead eyes which prevents his prayer; “the pang, the curse, with which they died, / Had never pass’d away” (443–44).

If the sudden return of the sinister red light suggests that guilt has followed the Mariner even to his homeland, then the poem does not finish on a note of absolution either. As the Mariner returns to shore, we are presented with a mediator and confessor in the figure of the Hermit. Yet instead of shriving the Mariner, the Hermit can only set in motion an endless penance: “‘say quick,’ quoth he, ‘I bid thee say / What manner man art thou?’” (609—10). The poem turns upon itself, and we find that the narrative that we have overheard—which is rationalized in Christian readings as describing a man who comes to knowledge through suffering—is the continuance of that very suffering.

Thus ends—or rather fails to end—the Mariner’s tale: not with an absolved and reconciled Christian, but with a deeply ambiguous character, potentially possessing daemonic characteristics. (This very ambiguity disturbs the Wedding Guest during the tale itself, as he fears the Mariner may himself be one of the dead.) The strangeness of the Mariner and his experience have not in any way been reincorporated into a Christian community: if anything, the Mariner lies in the tradition of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, as an outcast. He passes “like night, from land to land” (619), still unable to reach the daybreak of redemption, unable to expiate his sin, but only to relive it in the telling.

These points—the ambiguity of the moral action, the dominance of the daemonic, and the inexpiability of the crime—have been noted throughout the history of criticism of The Rime. They are, after all, surely the spurs for the original judgments of irrationality made by Coleridge’s contemporaries. Modern criticism has often organized them in a broadly similar interpretative fashion. As we have noted, the poem does suggest something of a Christian moral order on which classic Christian readings such as those
made by Robert Penn Warren and G. Wilson Knight relied. However, the counter-tradition is to suggest that this moral order is not sufficient to contain the dark forces represented within the poem. For instance, Edward Bostetter holds that readings of the poem that see a coherent Christian narrative can only function

by rationalizing those portions of the poem in which the powers of the universe are presented as sternly authoritarian and punitive, and ignoring those in which they are revealed as capricious and irrational.

Similarly, Raimonda Modiano claims that while “the Mariner conspicuously relies on Christian rituals and beliefs . . . the Christian doctrine fails to explain his world of excessive suffering and irrational events.” David Miall, attributing the poem’s irrationality to irreparable childhood guilt, confirms that “behind the moral concepts of the poem lies some other, more intractable experience which resists the moral reading.”

This tradition reaches right into more recent criticism. For instance, Anne Williams contends that “the concept of crime and punishment rushes in as a way of ensuring order in the universe.” Williams’s Kristevan reading sees the poem’s ethical side as a symbolic order striving to contain “the semiotic pre-history of the speaking subject . . . the primal break” which offers up a “horrifying vacancy.” And Leah Richards-Fisher takes the “lack of reason in the universe and the capriciousness of providence” as her starting point in arguing that the Wedding Guest has a more tragic appreciation of the world than the Mariner, the latter using providential categories to try to make sense of a senseless world. While these five readings range over different approaches and emphases, they all suggest that Chris-

20. Williams, 1124.
tianity represents a rational moral order in the poem overcome by irrational forces stemming from a darker apprehension of the world. I am going to argue that this common reading—which we might gloss as the counter-moral tradition—makes a false opposition between Christianity and irrationality. To show this, we must first explore the far from uncomplicated temper of Coleridge's religious thinking at the time of writing.

Original Sin and Originary Guilt

The young Coleridge, in line with the position of contemporary Unitarianism, had accepted that while moral responses and judgments are entirely fitting at the human level, at the metaphysical level all apparent evil is subordinated to a higher, providential scheme. "Reasoning strictly and with logical Accuracy," Coleridge writes, "I should deny the existence of any Evil, inasmuch as the end determines the nature of the means and I have been able to discover nothing of which the end is not good."^2 When combined with a few other theodical commonplaces—suggesting that we are only happy if we progress to a better state, and that ultimately God's ways cannot be questioned by human reasoning—Coleridge in his first "Lecture on Revealed Religion" (1795) holds a broadly optimistic view of the world. In this view, as he confides to John Thelwall in 1796, "Guilt is out of the Question."^23 Crucially, therefore, we have an optimistic model of the subject, one that can reach a sublime "noontide majesty" (line 127), as he puts it in "Religious Musings." In his journey towards Anglicanism, a constellation of related shifts appeared in his thinking: from Socinianism to Trinitarianism, from confidence in perfectibility to a need for redemption, and, crucially, from a view that evil is actually part of divine benevolence to an acceptance of original sin.\textsuperscript{24}

It is the period leading up to the writing of \textit{The Rime} that marks the beginning of the end of his Unitarian faith. In 1796, long, politico-prophetic poems such as "Religious Musings," the unfinished "The Destiny of Nations," and "Ode to the Departing Year" attempted to maintain the hopeful tenets of politically radical Unitarianism in the face of collapsing hopes relating to both Coleridge's personal involvement in radicalism and, of course, the wider context of the French Revolution. In the intervening two years, Coleridge's optimism was increasingly strained, and this


passed over into his theological beliefs. In March 1798—the very month that *The Rime* was finished, and the month that revolutionary France invaded Switzerland—Coleridge wrote to his brother, George:

I believe most stedfastly [sic] in Original Sin; that from our mothers’ wombs our understandings are darkened; and even where our understandings are in the Light, that our organization is depraved, & our volitions imperfect. (CL 1:396)

What is striking about this passage is not only the admission of human imperfection, but the identification of an *inherent* depravity which appears prior to the reception of sense data and the formation of associations. Although the reference to “organization” might suggest Coleridge is still thinking in terms of the empirical psychology bequeathed to him by David Hartley and Joseph Priestley, this notion of innate corruption is in clear tension with such a psychology and the ethics derived from it. There is a tendency to evil; a stain on human nature, which flies in the face of the *tabula rasa* origins and the perfected, providentially-directed destiny, of the human subject as conceived by Unitarianism.

However, we must note that Coleridge also remarks in the same letter, “Of guilt I say nothing.” In William Ulmer’s words, the “1798 profession seems Janus-faced . . . mediately between the poet’s Unitarian and Anglican phases.” While Coleridge is forced towards acknowledging a darker view of human nature, he is clearly still uncomfortable with the aspect of culpability. Ulmer attempts to maintain a continuity and stability in Coleridge’s beliefs (“surely he knew his own mind?”), claiming that the letter denies guilt and maintains the view that original sin is imperfection but not criminality. Yet, I would hazard that the matter is more complex than this. For it is certainly difficult to invoke the doctrine of *peccatum originale* without calling up the idea of guilt. Indeed, Coleridge does not actually deny guilt as such, but rather abstains from comment (in contrast to his steadfast avowal of original sin).

Thus, we see that in 1798 Coleridge accepted original sin, but was hesitant—and perhaps uncertain—over the notion of what we might term originary guilt. Yet, of course, *The Rime* is a poem that revolves precisely around guilt. If Coleridge says nothing of guilt in the letter to George Coleridge, then *The Rime* is positively obsessed with it. The poem is filled with religious motifs that demand a view of sin as criminality: blessing, shriving, penance, confession and intercession, for instance. These are all

practices alien to Unitarianism, in that they look backwards to expiate deeds, rather than forward to reform future conduct.\textsuperscript{27} Even if these practices are directed at sins committed in life—\textit{personal} rather than original sin—they imply a theological framework based around purification and corruption, of which original sin and the atonement are the doctrinal archetypes. Equally, as ceremonies that recur, they suggest an inevitable tendency to transgression on the part of human beings who thus require outside aid to overcome their moral failings.

William Ulmer, attempting to reconcile the poem with Unitarianism, claims that the trials of the Mariner are simply an ongoing moral education through suffering, and that the poem "defers the entire issue of an achieved salvation."\textsuperscript{28} Yet his focus on providentially justified suffering ignores the fundamental desire for purification and release that accompanies the distinctly penitential motifs like those mentioned above. We cannot but think about the questions of ultimate release from guilt and whether humans can achieve this themselves, questions that Ulmer claims are bracketed out, not least because the poem itself borrows the language of atonement: "He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away / The Albatross's blood" (545–46). Even Ulmer must query, "why should his anguish and alienation continue?"\textsuperscript{29} This obsession with guilt and its expiation, I think, suggests that the poem expresses a darker feeling for culpability attached to original sin than that to which Coleridge would explicitly attest at the time. This feeling for culpability strongly suggests that the poem is exploring ground \textit{outside} of Unitarianism.

Yet in reading \textit{The Rime} in this way, I am not simply overlooking Coleridge's doubts about the doctrine and interpreting the poem as what Ulmer critically terms "an occluded Anglicanism unable to recognize itself as such."\textsuperscript{30} Coleridge's doubts over originary guilt also stamp their mark powerfully on the character of the poem; indeed they are, I believe, the initial source for the poem's intractable irrationality. If \textit{The Rime} is at one moment a powerful ethical narrative and at the next a horrifyingly irrational one, I would derive this divided tone, in the first instance, from Coleridge's difficult passage \textit{between} Unitarianism and Anglicanism. He was drawn towards the mainstream position he would ultimately adopt—"My faith is simply this—that there is an original corruption in our nature

\textsuperscript{27} As Priestley puts it, "the only atonement for sin" is based on a future of "repentance and reformation"—see \textit{A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos} (Northumberland: A. Kennedy, 1799), 205.
\textsuperscript{29} Ulmer, "Necessary Evils," 353–54.
\textsuperscript{30} Ulmer, "Virtue," 399.
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... from the consequences of which, we may be redeemed by Christ" (CL 807)—from a Unitarian position that saw original sin as unjust, superstitious and unintelligible. The Rime reflects its time of writing by involving both: like the 1798 letter, it is "Janus-faced." It reflects both the power and the terror of the doctrine.

On this basis, I am going to argue for a radical modification of the counter-moral tradition of readings. Such readings see non-Christian irrationality, such as the unconscious, the Gothic, or simply a morally tragic world, troubling a rational order presented in Christian moral categories. Conversely, I will argue that the irrationality comes from within the Christian tradition, insofar as Unitarianism had characterized original sin as a strange and injurious superstition. While Coleridge, in The Rime, is clearly drawn to the moral narrative set up around original sin, he also attests to the horror he still feels at such a narrative, a horror deriving from Unitarian optimism and rationalism. The strongest evidence for this is that the character of the irrationalities that we have identified in The Rime can be traced back to specific Unitarian polemics against originary guilt. The force of these objections still seemed to affect Coleridge even as he explored the possibility of a depraved or guilty humanity.

Thus, for instance, we earlier identified the Mariner's transgression as being a moral non-event: there was no evil motive adduced for it, and it was initially unclear whether the albatross's life had any moral significance. The Mariner transgressed a moral rule without realizing; as such, it is hard to know how guilt could or should be incurred. While the Mariner's punishment is at least related to one of his own acts, thus foreclosing a direct analogy with original sin, there is the same atmosphere of existential persecution so ably communicated in Unitarian polemics. As Joseph Priestley writes with disapproval: "And they say . . . it would have been just in God to have made us all suffer the most exquisite and endless torments in hell, even though we have never sinned in our persons." Original sin dislocates the moral calculus from its roots in actual motive or agency: guilt is simply something that befalls us, and this is something reflected in the Mariner's tale.

It was also noted that the poem's imagery often seemed unaccountably daemonic given the supposedly theistic framework. Yet this too seems to have a source in Unitarian objections to conventional Christianity. Unitarianism held the constellation of doctrines around original sin and its expia-

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31. The motiveless nature of the crime is an irrationality that Christianizing interpretations of the poem have sometimes accepted. For example, Robert Penn Warren claims that "the lack of motivation, the perversity . . . re-enacts the Fall" (227). However, this is in strong contrast to the order imposed on the rest of the poem.

tion to be ritualistic superstitions: a “strange doctrine . . . injurious both to our maker and ourselves” in Priestley’s words (ibid.). Coleridge, in 1795, had described the orthodox Christian view of punishment to be “this dreadful Equity, this Tartarean Justice.” The crucial word here is “Tartarean.” Just as Priestley endeavored to separate Judaeo-Christian ethics from a supposedly primitive discourse on taboo in his writings against original sin, here Coleridge is trying to separate Christianity from the pagan belief in a fearsome underworld such as Tartarus (Hades). What The Rime inherits from such polemic is a sense for the archaic nature of the original sin doctrine. If the forces that exact retribution appear daemonic, this is not surprising: for Coleridge had long considered much of the legal narrative of orthodox Christianity to be brutal and primitive, unworthy of a rationalized moral religion.

Finally, the inexpiability of the crime reflects the debate over human perfectibility, especially given Coleridge’s ever-diminishing faith in such ethical and political advancement. Unitarianism was generally optimistic about humanity’s prospects, holding it absurd and unscriptural that God would make moral demands that he knew would be impossible to fulfill. Unitarianism believes that human beings can be good, if the right social and political conditions come about. Thus, Priestley objects to the notion of innate depravity by arguing

> You cannot think that God would command, and expect obedience, when he had not given power to obey; and much less that he would urge men to provide for their own safety and happiness, when himself had put an effectual bar in the way of it.⁴³

Yet in assenting to original sin as part of a description of human nature, Coleridge was halfway to acknowledging the fact that humans had an inherent inability to respond to moral demands—not just individual demands, but the overarching demand to follow the Good.⁴⁵ Facing a guilt one has no capacity to overcome is a moral horror we see clearly expressed in The Rime, and the moment where the Mariner bites his own arm in order to speak is perhaps emblematic of the terrible perversity of his helpless condition. Even Ulmer, who maintains the poem is primarily Unitarian in outlook, has to admit that it is shadowed with “an unpurged Gothic guilt.”⁴⁶

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33. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lectures, 205.
34. Priestley, Tracts, 6.
35. Indeed, a slightly different way of reading the terrors of inexpiability is to suggest that Coleridge was beginning to believe that humanity did require redemption from outside, and yet his Unitarianism, which treated Jesus Christ merely as an exemplary human, failed to provide a redeemer.
In short, if *The Rime* is an expression of a moral order involving an innate guilt that Coleridge was yet to admit explicitly, then the terrors of the poem are due to the fact that such a moral order still appeared terrifying. For years, Coleridge had shared with mainstream Unitarianism a view that original sin was a doctrine of outrageous cruelty, especially when combined with corollary beliefs in hell and election. As Priestley puts it in the *Three Tracts*:

An arbitrary and unreasonable partiality in favour of some of the human race, and the most cruel and unjust severity towards others, as condemning them to everlasting torments for crimes of which they could not be guilty, and expecting of them that which [God had] not enabled them to do.37

Yet, if the poem’s obsession with guilt and expiation is anything to go by, he found this vision increasingly powerful, even though he found it difficult or impossible to rationalize. Thus, the poem speaks where the 1798 letter chooses not to pass comment, portraying the doctrine in monstrous hyperbole and thus reflecting its disturbing hold over Coleridge’s shifting religious beliefs. It is surely the poem of a man who is reluctantly and terrifyingly drawn to the possibility that something he thought, and still thinks, irrational seems undeniable. What if we were indeed cursed with such a guilt? As such, it is not surprising that many critics found the poem more gothic than sublime, for it is a Unitarian nightmare—original sin—coming true.

**Rationalizing *The Rime?*: Original Sin, Mystery and the Haunted Subject**

By 1802, even if the final conversion to Anglicanism is some years away, Coleridge writes to his brother that “the Socinian & Arian Hypotheses are utterly untenable” (*CL* 2:807), and asserts to John Prior Estlin that Christianity under “the Priestleyan Hypothesis” is void insofar as it denies original sin, redemption, grace and justification (*CL* 2:821). That guilt which, if my reading of the poem is correct, had haunted him as a possibility in 1798, became an explicit and avowed part of his own beliefs. As such, he was forced to come to terms with each of the irrational aspects that had menaced the coherence of *The Rime*: the nightmare portrait of original sin given by Unitarianism had to be assimilated. It is thus unsurprising that when Coleridge came to revise the text of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, many of the changes made ensured that the points we have identified as irrational were contained and explicated rather more firmly in an Anglican framework.

The most important emendations were made for 1817’s *Sibylline Leaves*,

and in subsequent editions of poetical works during his lifetime, including the 1834 version cited here. Some of these alterations were very subtle. Compare:

Alone on the wide wide Sea;
And Christ would take no pity on
My soul in agony

(225–27)

Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.

(1834, 233–35)

The subtle shift from “the” to “a” renders the phrase less dark: the symbolic resonance of the ocean as a place of solitude is diminished in referring to a particular sea. Meanwhile, the revised line on pity not only avoids heuristically suggesting a pitiless Christ, but renders the lack of salvation syntactically less absolute: whereas the 1798 version implies Christ has resolutely turned his face from the Mariner, 1834 merely states the absence of pity.

Other changes were more substantial. Important alterations were made to the spectral-ship scene, which might be seen as a concentrated emblem for all the forces that seem so resistant to rationalization. The two spectral figures become capitalized allegories of death and life-in-death, the latter described as a “Night-mare” (1834, 193). This allegorization not only diminishes the threat of a literal, daemonic order opposed to Christianity (and may even suggest the psychological projections of a dream world), it means we now have some clue as to the punishment imposed on the Mariner. The scene becomes more intelligible: it seems that the Mariner could have been punished by death, or by a life of mortifying penance, and that the latter was chosen. In the same passage from 1817, Coleridge replaced “playing” (192) with “casting” (1834, 196) dice, suggesting something more providential than arbitrary. Another important change was made as early as 1800, altering the closing scenes when the ship returns to the bay. Reanimation of the curse-bearing corpses, and the sections describing the red glare rising from the waves—both symbols of recurring guilt—are virtually excised, thus allowing the moonlight and the seraph band to dominate a less problematic homecoming. This allows the narrative to conclude in a less agonized way, suggesting that the Mariner is undergoing a process of redemption, rather than being menaced by inexpiable guilt.

The most radical change of all was the addition of a substantial paratext.

The gloss, as Kathleen Wheeler has emphasized, delimits the narrative in a major way:

the two most characteristic elements of the gloss . . . are its geographical specifications and its technique of streamlining the narrative so that the sequence of events and their causal connections are made more clear. The verse is correspondingly vague on these three categories of time, space, and causality. 39

Wheeler suggests that the gloss is ironic—a deliberately bad, reductive reading of the poem—and indeed at times it does appear like a parodic illustration of the difference between language's poetic and referential functions:

And now the storm-blast came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong:
He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
And chased us south along.

(1834, 41-44 and gloss)

Yet the notion that the gloss may be a reductive or even bad reading—an assertion also made by Leah Richards-Fisher—is not incompatible with its evident rhetorical authority. As Jerome McGann's highly influential analysis of The Rime proves, by creating an economy of text and commentary the gloss sets in motion a certain hermeneutic to which the reader or critic finds him or herself bound from the outset. 40 This hermeneutic is pre-eminently an Anglican one, which brings the body of the text under a more fixed Christian ideology. Thus, whereas the 1798 text portrays troubling dreams of an anonymous spirit pursuing the ship, the gloss confirms the dreams authoritatively and informs us that "a spirit had followed them . . . concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted" (gloss, 131-34). This scholarly note affirms a religious context for the uncanny forces in the poem. Similar confirmation of otherwise ambiguous supernatural occurrences are made elsewhere: the Virgin Mary intercedes for the Mariner, the presence and mission of the angel troop are made significantly clearer, and the Polar Spirit is identified and placed in a Christian penitential context. Of course, these glosses also—insofar as the critic is bound to lend them a certain privilege—negate the possibility that the Mariner is an unreliable narrator.

The glosses thus clarify a salvational trajectory, joining many of the peni- 
tential motifs into a more coherent progression in which the Mariner is 
punished for his killing of the albatross, blesses the water-snakes with the 
mediation of a guardian saint, expiates the curse of the dead crew, and re-
ceives “the penance of life” (gloss, 574—77). This narrative is enforced even 
at the moment of prayerlessness and accursedness by the sole non-prosaic 
gloss, which diffuses the terror of a “heart as dry as dust” (1834, 247) and 
the water burning “a still and awful red” (1834, 271) with a vivid vision of 
redemption:

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying 
Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every 
where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and 
their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter 
unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a si-
lent joy at their arrival. (gloss, 263—66)

This beautiful gloss, with strong Biblical overtones of covenant and escha-
tological telos, suggests once more that there will be salvation and redemp-
tion at the end of the Mariner’s journey.41

The later variants of The Rime, therefore, are indubitably more rational-
ized. In reference to our three major loci of irrationality, the legal narrative 
of transgression and punishment is made more coherent; many of the dae-
monic elements are identified and incorporated into a Christian mythol-
ogy; and, perhaps most importantly, the sin that the Mariner carries seems 
expiable. It is a less ambiguous poem, and definitely a more Anglican one. 
Yet Coleridge did not totally void the poem of irrationality, and for good 
reason. We must remember John Lockhart’s reaction to The Rime: if its ir-
rationality shocked those critics who attacked it as gothic, it was also the 
grounds for those who thought it sublime. Even in its late versions, The 
Rime retains its power to disturb. For while Coleridge no longer saw ori-
ginary guilt as horrifying and irrational in the sense he had back in 1797— 
98, that does not stop it being a doctrine that is fearsome and mysterious.

There has been a tradition of thinking within Christianity which has ac-
cepted, to an extent, all the criticisms of the kind made by Unitarianism 
about the foundations of its moral order. This tradition claims that only by 
accepting a brute and irrational fact at the root of existence, can we expli-
cate existence itself. This is perhaps the greatest weakness of McGann’s

41. In particular, there are echoes of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 15:5, 26:2—4), the 
spiritual yearning of the Psalms (e.g. Psalms 27, 69, 123), the tale of the Prodigal Son (Luke 
15:11—31), and New Testament eschatology (e.g., Matthew 11:28, Hebrews 11:16, II Corinth-
ians 5:1—7).
account, which has sometimes been claimed as a definitive advance beyond the Christianizing versus counter-moral debate. McGann defines the Christian ideology primarily as a hermeneutic which aims to create a totalized order of symbols, and thus he forestalls the possibility of irrationality or unreadability lying within a Christian approach. Nevertheless, such an approach does exist within Christianity and has a long, powerful history (beginning perhaps with 1 Corinthians 1:19–20, and Tertullian's maxim Credo Quia Absurdum, “I believe it because it is impossible”). For instance, Blaise Pascal contends that nothing shocks us more deeply than this doctrine [of original sin]. Nevertheless without this most incomprehensible of all mysteries we are incomprehensible to ourselves. Within this gnarled chasm lie the twists and turns of our condition.

A similar admission is made by one of Coleridge’s favorite theologians, Martin Luther, when he claims in “The Smalcald Articles” of 1537 that “hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand it. It must be believed because of the revelation in the Scriptures.” Original sin is admitted as a mystery of faith, inexplicable precisely because of its position as an existential ground on which all else depends.

Coleridge joins this tradition. In 1802, he claims that he believes the drama of original sin and atonement “not because I understand it; but because I feel, that it is not only suitable to, but needful for, my nature” (CL 2:807). Yet this is no short-lived, purely affective response. In his most thorough theological work, Aids to Reflection (1825), Coleridge continues to assert that what he accepts through faith is not fully explicable through reason. Indeed, some of his points on original sin are not far from Unitarian ones. For instance, he rejects the legalistic attempt to define and justify original sin as a hereditary punishment incurred by Adam as “an outrage of common-sense” based on “flimsy analogies drawn from the imperfections of human ordinances and human justice-courts.” Nevertheless, the universality of evil is affirmed, though the fact that all wills are evil—that all

42. (See, e.g., Richards-Fisher, “Defining the Personae,” 63).
wills have somehow chosen to be evil—is inexplicable. This is said to be a datum that lies at the base of all religions, not just Christianity. Thus:

A moral Evil is an Evil that has its origin in a Will. An Evil common to all must have a ground common to all . . . that there is an Evil common to all is a Fact; and this Evil must therefore have a common ground. Now this evil ground cannot originate in the Divine Will: it must therefore be referred to the Will of Man. And this evil Ground we call Original Sin. It is a Mystery, that is, a Fact, which we see, but cannot explain; and the doctrine a truth which we apprehend, but can neither comprehend nor communicate. (288)

Similarly, Coleridge—in a way familiar from Unitarian polemic—rejected the notion of original sin’s expiation through vicarious atonement, i.e. a literal interpretation of Christ’s crucifixion as a blood substitution. In Aids to Reflection, he dismissed such an interpretation as a “species of sophistry” (318). However, this does not mean that Coleridge thought there was no guilt and absolution involved in original sin and redemption:

Do you rejoice when the Atonement made by the Priest has removed the civil stain from your name, restored you to your privileges. . . . Here is an atonement which takes away a deeper, worser stain, an eating Canker-Spot in the very heart of your personal Being! (324)

As Coleridge’s rhetorical question about “civil stain” is trying to show, notions of ransom and debt are merely metaphors describing the consequences of redemption, taken from the most immediate experiences of those to whom Christ was preaching. However, these figures are not applicable to the nature of redemption, which is “a spiritual and transcendent Mystery” (332) that Coleridge specifically pairs with the mystery of original sin: “the mode, the possibility, we are not competent to know” (324).

In short, the invocation of mystery allows Coleridge to accept apparently violent and troubling theological facts. Given this approach to sin and redemption, it would be wrong to see the irrationality in The Rime as stemming solely from his fears about the doctrine of original sin at a time when his beliefs were shifting towards it. Rather, original sin remained a doctrine that he admitted as beyond knowledge and explication, which means that the relationship between irrationality and Christianity, even in the late text, is a strong one. Although Coleridge tried to approach the epistemological problems with a Kantian rigor (not applying phenomenal categories to divine matters, and reining in speculative theology, is an undercurrent informing his treatment of original sin, redemption and indeed predestination), the end result is as Pascal expressed it. This incomprehensible fact comprehends us.
For Coleridge, we cannot understand ourselves without admitting mysteries—fearsome mysteries—into our worldview. We do not understand our sense of intrinsic guilt, and we are terrified by the burden it brings, but we feel it nonetheless. The shock of such a mystery—expressed so well by Pascal—very much survives even in the late texts of *The Rime*. We are now even further away from the conventional reading of the poem, whereby a Christian order is undermined by a non-Christian irrationality. Now we see that the irrational but brute fact of original sin that lies at the heart of the poem also lies close to the heart of Coleridge’s Christianity. Even the late *Rime* is a narrative of acts that is shadowed by an excess of ethical responsibility over and above the sum of those acts. This excess is the burden of original sin. The irrationality is a Christian avowal.

Above, I suggested more than once that the young Coleridge was haunted by the possibility of originary guilt. We now see that this is more than just a turn of phrase, for the logic of original sin is indeed a haunting of the subject. Here is a guilt and a responsibility which claims the subject—and which the subject must accept—which cannot be linked to any empirical act or motive of that subject. In contrast to the Unitarian subject, which was psychologically transparent to itself and considered a *tabula rasa*, this new and darker subject has guilt, possessing and possessed, at, or before, its origin. As *Aids to Reflection* remarks, “let the evil be supposed such as to imply the impossibility of . . . referring to any particular time at which it . . . commenced (287).” Coleridge conceives of a split subject:

the most frequent impediment to men’s turning the mind inward upon themselves is that they are afraid of what they shall find there.
There is an aching hollowness in the bosom, a dark cold speck at the heart, an obscure and boding sense of a somewhat, that must be kept out of sight of the conscience; some secret lodger, whom they can neither resolve to eject or retain. (24)

Coleridge considers it imperative to stare this secret lodger in the face, this impurity or stain on the *tabula rasa*. The spectral ship that brings judgment in *The Rime* appears initially as a speck on the horizon, and both recall the “mote . . . in thine brother’s eye” speech of Matthew 7:3. The terror and sublimity of the poem lie in its exploration of this transgression that is always already present at the heart of ethical subjectivity.

If guilt is spectral—both mine and yet before me—it is no surprise that *The Rime* reads like a dream. For a dream, a creation of mine and yet not

47. This particular section, suggesting a relation to evil outside the categories of time and space, seems indebted to the first part of Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Elinor Shaffer has explored the links between the two texts in “Metaphysics of Culture: Kant and Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 31 (1970).
mine, is perhaps the closest analogy for Coleridge’s conception of original sin as something prior to and yet belonging to the subject. Indeed, as recent studies such as Jennifer Ford’s *Coleridge on Dreaming* have pointed out, there was a clear moral import to the world of the unconscious in Coleridge’s thinking. If there is one constant that unifies his diverse, mobile and even contradictory speculations on dreams, it is guilt. Ford argues that the displacement of a dream to, for example, the organic body or an external spirit is motivated and haunted by a sense of responsibility that Coleridge wished to evade. As she puts it, dreams suggest “an alternative consciousness that can be below waking consciousness,” thus threatening to expose regions of the mind “totally incompatible with . . . conscious morality.”

The “Dutch” unintelligibility of *The Rime*, its ominously overdetermined images, and its hypnotic ballad form all draw us into a dream-like world. And this world, despite all its irrationality, possesses a claim on us. It is terrifying, but it is also a form of knowledge: a terrifying knowledge, one that seems to say something about the human condition even if it remains resistant to total rationalization. Archetypally, therefore, *sublime* knowledge. Of course, to a secular world, the doctrine of original sin seems hopelessly archaic, but perhaps this is largely because we receive it in the mythic, hereditary form that Coleridge rejected. Coleridge turned it into a haunting of the subject, and in this form, if not in content, it seems far more contemporary.

Consider, for instance, Susan Eilenberg’s interpretation of the poem through the uncanny experience of “an alien spirit . . . [coming] to inhabit the body of the Mariner’s speech.” Both possessed and dispossessed by a language that speaks *him* as much as he speaks it, the Mariner is divided from himself. Eilenberg’s reading preempts Jacques Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other* in showing that the “I” is born into a language that is always already present, “demonstrating the difficulty of saying ‘I am’ in one’s own voice.” Thematically, Eilenberg largely belongs to the counter-moral tradition, dissolving moral or providential clusters “favoured by those who insist upon the . . . Christian implications of the poem” into arbitrary relations formed by accidental contiguities and metonymies. Like McGann, she can only perceive religion as a totalizing hermeneutic. Yet, in Coleridge’s treatment of original sin as a haunting of the subject, we can see the same dividing of the “I” from itself: a Christian experience of the very

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thing Eilenberg identifies. The language of the “I” and the ethical burden of the “I” both seem to come from a place other than the “I.” Yet the “I” must speak, and the “I” must act.

If the ambitions of the Unitarian subject seen in “The Destiny of Nations” were built on an empirical, tabula rasa psychology and held out for the perfectibility of a potentially self-transparent subject, then the subject here is always already divided. It is the antitype of the Unitarian heroic subject valorized in “The Destiny of Nations” and “Religious Musings.” Most devastatingly for Unitarian hopes, it is always already claimed by guilt, thus ruining the dream of perfectibility for which Locke’s philosophy opened space. However, as we have seen, this guilt is no merely external and legal matter, as in traditional theology: it is a speck on the heart, a secret lodger, a hollowness of the subject. It is a haunting, often specifically identified with the unconscious.

In this, Coleridge looked forward. If Kant was among the first modern philosophers to reformulate original sin into a theory of radical evil in Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, he was certainly not the last to fashion a darker selfhood: thinkers as varied as Sigmund Freud and Emmanuel Levinas also have put a kind of guilt at the root of, or prior to, the subject. Such thinkers avow a sense of a divided or haunted subject which is characteristically ours. As I have argued, The Rime speaks to this sense not despite but because of its own understanding of Christianity. Coleridge’s sense of original sin befalling the subject seems strikingly modern, perhaps precisely because it succeeded the collapse of an ethically optimistic, unitary model of subjectivity in the Enlightened tradition. As our psychoanalytic or phenomenologically decentered subjects follow the ruin of the Cartesian cogito, the anguished religious subject of The Rime follows the ruin of a classically eighteenth-century perfectible self. The intertwining of religion and irrationalism no doubt troubles us in an age with a fragile secular-enlightened legacy, but the pre-enlightenment nature of the doctrine of original sin is in a sense exactly what is at stake in the poem: whether or not we can have a subject exorcized of everything archaic that haunts it.

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