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REPETITION, DIFFERENCE AND LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION IN  
COLERIDGE'S 'THE ANCIENT MARINER'<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract*

Theological interpretations of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' have sometimes been judged to do little more than to compound the problem of interpretation. This essay reflects on a contrasting response from the Welsh poet David Jones which challenges the 'Rime' for a theological incoherence in itself constituting a failure of imagination, and then considers the relation of language to liturgy in recent postmodern theology. What emerges from Coleridge's poem is a divergence between the identical repetition of the tale itself and a 'repetition with difference' implied in the Mariner's vision of a procession to the kirk. Coleridge's 'Gothic' imagination can do little more than stage this difference of repetition on the margins of his poem, but there are implications for his later writing career, as he moves away from the predominance of imagination towards the counter-horizons of speculative theological prose. (Word length: 5475)

*The Ancient Mariner* is not good at finishing: it offers both a weak formal conclusion and a tale presented as only one of many tellings. The restless self-repetition of the Mariner's story, together with his more marginal but equally unaccomplished procession to the kirk 'in a goodly company' are not innocent forms of open-endedness so much as fraught modes of incompleteness. The desire for consummation, for completeness and arrival, is doubly skewed within the poem: though telling the tale brings temporary relief and perhaps changes it in some way (though we have no means of telling), it is destined to be summoned up once again at that 'uncertain hour' which will compel the Mariner to repeat it, when it will once more consume narrative space and time without being able to tell what exactly it is a narrative of. Or so we as readers assume. We don't actually know whether the Mariner is telling us the truth of how his tale convulses him with the need to repeat it, and we easily forget that this claim (which we do take seriously) occurs as part of the same weak or Christianising conclusion we tend not to take seriously. The founding narrative repetition

compulsion is not in itself wholly central to the ballad as we have it, but is distinctively offset by the Mariner's wish to walk in company to the kirk, so as to participate in another narrative with, potentially, another mode of interminability.

I want to suggest that here we find two incompatible, asymmetrically intertwined modes of repetition, the one wholly compulsive and the other equally incomplete though perhaps in terms of a different dispensation. On the one hand, we have the Mariner's narrative which is an unreclaimable history because it rests so narrowly on his own repetition compulsion which seems to offer no outcome or continuation. The need to re-proclaim his trauma returns intermittently, as a sort of visitation, but during the times of momentary release and relief another visitational mode is glimpsed, the procession to the kirk, suggesting a more benign repetition with difference, a celebrative participation in time and community. This latter path eludes the main body of the tale and lingers at a margin, one widely seen by critics as weak and conciliatory, but it allows the earlier devastating experience of identical repetition to be echoed by difference, with the glimpse that compulsion on its own does not in fact infill the entire space of the poem.

In a post-metaphysical age the theme of repetition has had its own contorted narrative, one which proclaims an excess of horizontal time, but also the possibility of radical renewal or even transcendence. For Kierkegaard, who initiates the series, repetition is a radical transition tasked with the need to evade Hegelian mediation; for Nietzsche it is the thought of eternal return; in Freud it is an uncanny compulsion, while with Derrida it is the founding trace of iterability and for Deleuze a virtuality of the new inherent in the past. The burden of such theories is that they presuppose a triumph of nihilism. It is with this in mind that theological writers like John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock have attempted to renew the Kierkegaardian understanding

of repetition by once more de-secularising it, so that what they see as a repetition with difference is not a punitive interruption but a participation in the divine life where differences belong together rather than being warring clans; for Pickstock in particular, such a repetition, freed from what Milbank has called the ontological violence of nihilism, is an indicator of liturgy and liturgical language.<sup>2</sup>

Theological attempts at reading of *The Ancient Mariner* have a chequered history, though in some ways they remain the poem's contested paradigm. R.P. Warren's famous essay entitled 'A Poem of Pure Imagination' first published over fifty years ago galvanised energies for an entire generation, though left a preponderantly negative legacy.<sup>3</sup> Warren asserted the coherence of *The Ancient Mariner's* themes with 'Coleridge's basic theological and philosophical views as given us in sober prose';<sup>4</sup> apart from what that assumes about Coleridge's own variable rhetorics of frenzy or sobriety as distributed across different genres of writing, Warren is surely right to insist that Coleridge's later theological preoccupations are one of the horizons of the poem, no less because of that poem's resistance to them. Warren argued for an interpenetration of the vision of a sacramental life with the theme of imagination, and although the majority of readings reacting to his essay see the actual poem as exceeding or subverting these categories, it is more difficult to deny them altogether, arising as they do as part of the poem's troubled intentions. There is no straightforward subversive logic to be extracted from the *Rime's* perplexities. As untidy extrapolation occurring both within and beyond the poem, the symbolic articulates the shadows of what the poem was trying to become as well as illuminating its blockages. This is also to hint at trajectories by which the poem tries to leave itself behind.

It can be forgotten that Warren himself saw the killing of the albatross as motiveless; it is precisely because it re-enacts the sinful alienation of the Fall that it

cannot be a calculated murder but opens up a chain of consequences, at once deterministic but open to a sacramental mediation of determination.<sup>5</sup> This sets the scene for what is seen as the orthodox Christian response, whereby the tale is one of a halting progress from sin to repentance, though it has never escaped notice that only a very limited repentance seems able to penetrate the Gothicizing fabric of the poem.<sup>6</sup> Warren admitted that large areas of the poem were irrelevant to the 'sacramental business', as well as noting other, more recalcitrant symbolic binaries such as the sun and moon, or winds and storms.<sup>7</sup> He also notes the chief kernel of resistance: that though the Mariner brings salvation he cannot quite save himself, and his wandering is something less than the mark of a blessed vision.<sup>8</sup> One might summarize that the Mariner's yearning for pilgrimage, at its most intense when he fantasises being part of a procession to the kirk, never actually escapes the condition of a rootless nomadism. Early opponents of Warren were quick to point out that Coleridge's poem is as much haunted by punitive, capricious or irrational aspects of the universe.<sup>9</sup>

It seems clear, however, that *The Ancient Mariner* isn't in the business of shoring up a fundamentalist Christianity, however primordial that poem's sense of guilt and possible redemption. Indeed, the apparent depth of guilt and the seeming weakness of redemption are not without theological significance, seen in the context of a transition from experience to the horizons of that experience. There is a definite sense that Coleridge's ballad, however nightmarish, spurred on its author's attempts to interpret the world in the teeth of resistances. That very trauma, marginally in the poem but more extensively in his later writing career, was to provoke theological researches into possible differences of outcome and aftermath, a sense of truth arising from the will restored by a faith in 'Reason', though that sense proved unable to suspend the self-incarceration within experience except intermittently. Given the possibility of

such a view, I would partly go along with Raimonda Modiano's reading of *The Ancient Mariner*, in the course of which she argues that the sacred is only introduced into the poem through violence. Though the slaying of the albatross is a fundamental sacrifice, the poem as a whole subverts any sacrificial economy, she asserts.<sup>10</sup> The cycle of violence unleashed gives us not so much sacramental vision as a sacrificial crisis together with an erasure of the distinction between the sacred and profane, blessing or alienation.<sup>11</sup> As a Girardian reading of the *The Ancient Mariner*, this is in part already a theological one. It is not the business of Coleridge's poem to exemplify any theological motif, but in its very un-innocence before experience and disorder it presents the existential material out of which its own marginalised and tentative theological self-reading can begin. In one sense, the poetry doesn't 'hear' this reading; its own traumatic invasion by repetition has no such horizon of possibility within the space of narrative. But that space is not co-extensive with the poem as a whole; given the need for the poem as a poem to finish somewhere, it paradoxically glimpses another mode of the incompletable by which it begins to walk away from itself. The Mariner who parts from the Wedding Guest also dreams of quitting his own psychic scene.

As secular metaphor we can see how easily the idea of symbolism comes to grief within the textural fabric of the poem,<sup>12</sup> at once so bruised and arbitrary, an apparent site for what Milbank calls ontological violence which can be read as the groundlessness of human life constituting an abyss rather than participation in the life of God.<sup>13</sup> Poetic text is not identical to poetic texture, however: the latter term solicits consideration of the relative density or translucence of the poetic *materia*, and also of the implied horizons before which any narrative itself must give out and where the status of repetition becomes paramount. If theology fails the dynamic of *The*

*Ancient Mariner*, we might nonetheless ask: to what extent can that poem offer itself up to theological judgment and contemplate as part of itself its own theological failings?

## II

One essay which takes up that challenge is by the Anglo-Welsh poet and artist-engraver David Jones, who published an introduction to a new edition of his copper engraving illustrations of *The Ancient Mariner* in 1964, the year in which another poet-critic, William Empson, declared the poem to be a deliberate ‘parody of the traditional struggle for atonement’.<sup>14</sup> Jones too had problems with the poem but from a very different perspective. As a Modernist influenced by Eliot’s theory of the dissociation of sensibility, he had limited sympathy for Romanticism as such, but had found himself continually going back to Coleridge’s poem. The essay is little read by Coleridgeans (with the exception of David Jasper)<sup>15</sup> and lies outside the academic mainstream. It has some cogent points to make, however, not least in that it offers theological judgment rather than Christian assimilation. For Jones the greater the poetic genius, the more we should probe for possible significances in every line. Coupled with that was his overriding respect for an exact *disciplina* of fidelity to contingent fact. His general interpretation of the poem is similar to Warren’s, seeing the Mariner’s unconscious act of praise at the sight of the water-snakes as the crux of the piece, finding the theology faultless: ‘for all are agreed that the prayer of praise far excels that of petition’.<sup>16</sup> But Jones wouldn’t have agreed with Warren or the earlier Coleridge that Original Sin is not hereditary but a fallen condition of the will, though Coleridge appears to have been already revising his view of Original Sin as early as March, 1798, while he was still working on the *Rime*.<sup>17</sup> Jones is clear that the poem narrates a primordial, mostly pagan tradition of ordeal, rather than a specifically

redemptive journey. The tutelary spirit which presides over the Antarctic demands a kind of *wergeld* in satisfaction for the wrong committed against a creature under his guardianship: 'The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do' (ll. 413-14), as one of the Polar Spirit's two fellow daemons observes.<sup>18</sup> Jones' reading is acutely sensitive to the role of the various supernatural powers in the *Rime*, and he celebrates what he calls the 'seraphic exactitude' which takes the ship as far as the Line but not one nautical mile beyond.<sup>19</sup> That the heavenly Curia neither abruptly nor wholly assumes power from the local *Numen* Jones finds a moving moment of celestial courtesy, though shrewdly notes that what appears moving here is also 'unvoiced and perhaps not meant'.<sup>20</sup> This accords with Raimonda Modiano's sense of how *The Ancient Mariner* calls into question any single centre of divine activity by introducing a proliferation of spirits; her quoting from Pierre Bayle's *Dictionary* entry for Cain in this context would have strongly appealed to David Jones' antiquarian interests. Modiano picks up Bayle's sense that evil actions may be the consequence of the sport of some whimsical supernatural agency,<sup>21</sup> and Jones for his part finds a 'slight whiff of idiotic...excitement' in the game of chance in Part III which gives the victory to Life-in-Death as a chooser-of-the-slain figure from some far-off Teutonic or Celtic cult, wryly noting that 'We all deteriorate, we all lose our looks, and of nothing is this more true than the figures of a discredited cult'.<sup>22</sup>

Fascinated as Jones is with the Mariner as an avatar of residual or decaying cults which maintain their psychological impact, he meets head-on what for him is the overwhelming problem within a poem which might otherwise claim to be the spiritual heir of the Celtic wonder-voyage. He notes that the vessel of *ecclesia*, the voyaging of the Church through time, was a favourite type for the Greek and Latin Fathers.<sup>23</sup> However, the moment the Mariner steps back on shore and desires absolution from



the anchorite, this becomes for Jones an episode that can no longer be dissociated from what he calls 'the ordinary processes of contrition, confession, absolution, penance.'<sup>24</sup> Jones sees that 'for "penance" we must read "ordeal", and for Christian confessor, we have to substitute some agent of the gods placing a fate upon a mortal'. Jones is quick to add that 'we never can, of course, *quite* manage this', standing as we do within the Christian tradition, where the motif of shriving invokes or provokes that tradition.<sup>25</sup> His reading takes particular exception to Coleridge's 1817 gloss explaining how, once the Mariner has been shriven, 'the penance of life falls on him', to which Jones will retort that it is 'no part of the job of those who administer this sacrament to impose compulsion-neuroses under the guise of penances, so we are faced with a flat travesty of a sacrament'.<sup>26</sup> Jones can only assume that Coleridge, for all his erudition, was imperceptive of the implications of pastoral theology, or, worse, that he 'disregarded what he knew in the interests of the *schema* of his poem'.<sup>27</sup> In Jones' view no artist is at liberty to distort what he has chosen as part of his *materia poetica*, which leaves us with a poem which has apparently traduced itself in order to purvey its high Gothicism, or one too slack to do justice to the real theological crux it has broached.

Whether we see this as a naïve or antiquarian reading matters less than this salutary challenge (from someone equally committed to the poetic process) to the poem's own autonomy. Perhaps for Jones part of the solution to interpreting *The Ancient Mariner* is to draw it into a larger domain of writing which no longer privileges its aesthetic uniqueness, or rather values the aesthetic precisely where it makes for linkages with the mysterious. And for Coleridge the writer it was precisely these internal blockages within the allegorical logic of his poem which called to be explored further or otherwise in his later career. Such divergences are already present in principle, of

course, along the ‘weak’ post- or counter-narrative margins of the poem as we have it. What is the status of the ‘penance more’, the compulsive repetition, which the Mariner must undergo? Is it, as Jones argued, an unredemptive ordeal of ceaseless wandering, or can it be, that the ‘more’ of penance involves, not just a thorn in the flesh, but a difference of outcome for a burden not otherwise relieved?<sup>28</sup>

This poetic blockage which is simultaneously a highly charged narrative is for readers the predominant experience of *The Ancient Mariner*. As Modiano says, just as the Wedding Guest is stunned by the Mariner’s tale, so the Mariner is stunned by his own act of violence, one disconnected from himself and ultimately incomprehensible.<sup>29</sup> A number of critics note that the Mariner’s own burden is ambivalent, that even before curse or blessing there may be a layer of wish-fulfilment.<sup>30</sup> Repetition in the finite mind of the eternal I AM turns out to be not so much creative participation as a blasphemous, usurping self-assertion on the part of the human.<sup>31</sup> The *Rime* may be itself a fable of the consequences of a fascination with art, usurpation being the principal motif in the events described. The tale of itself usurps the Mariner in its demand for repetition, so that there is no end to answering the Hermit’s ‘What manner man art thou?’<sup>32</sup> This very question might beg another, the greatest usurpation of all, if the Mariner were to answer ‘Who do *you* say that I am?’, but not only is he a *failed* Christ, his request for redemption out of his own experience also seems to fail, though we might also note here that where all human resources fail this can be characterised by Kierkegaard as the onset of a genuine repetition.<sup>33</sup> It looks very much as though the *Rime* gets stuck at an aesthetic and ethical repetition, valuing a poetic word which can never sufficiently disburden itself to be open to a religious silence, the sole authentic mode of repetition. Entralment to a force which has sway over life and death is equally an entralment

which traps death within life, in other words an identical repetition, the inability to both die and renew life throughout time.<sup>34</sup> The Mariner's story offers no redemptive horizon of its own, though this is less a denial of Christianity than an internal lack within a narrative which feels unaided by any stronger margin other than its own compelling narrative drive.

That the Mariner's tale exhibits compulsive or identical repetition has long been acknowledged by criticism. David Bunyan speculates that what is uncanny in repetition is that it forces an unwanted unification upon a disoriented mind, one which is regressive and unbidden. So it is the repetition as such, not the content of that repetition, which is the source of anxiety.<sup>35</sup> This would render repetition as a peculiarly threatening mode of incompleteness. According to Brown, for Paul de Man repetition amounts to a repetition *of* difference rather than one *with* difference, so there can be no therapeutic reworking of a memory simply the signifier of anteriority as such. Though, as Brown points out, the arbitrary in the *Rime* is inherently ambivalent, because the arbitrary also *arbitrates*, so that what is external or extraneous is no less internally determinative.<sup>36</sup> Bunyan reminds us that the nature of repetition is enigmatic, as Freud acknowledged. Why repeat? The Lacanian answer is that repetition staunches a gap, forecloses upon an absence, however futile the device is felt to be in itself, a vain attempt to internalise a power of experience greater than any sense of self.<sup>37</sup> For Bunyan the repetition compulsion also gives rise to an interpretive compulsion, the attempt to domesticate the text by somehow repeating it in one's own voice, which is Coleridge's founding fantasy as its originator. Within that frame the Mariner attempts to re-voice his own tale as a source of inward meaning, and so lays across his history a veneer of Christian symbolism.<sup>38</sup> At this point I part company with Bunyan's penetrating analysis. Within the *Rime* we have

not just one of many supposed versions of the Mariner's story, but also the distinctively weak aftermath which opens up the possibility of a repetition with difference, the walk to the kirk, even from within the temporary abeyance of the repetition compulsion itself.

The judgment of Modiano's analysis is that the Mariner, beginning his journey distrusting any compatibility between Christian symbolism and the world of spiritual desolation actually encountered, ends up constructing a narrative which circumscribes terror within the framework of conventional Christian beliefs.<sup>39</sup> By this process the Mariner 'cannibalizes' himself as once he had sucked his own blood, becoming the sacrificial victim of the tale which must ever begin anew from a zero point of initial violent fracture.<sup>40</sup> Modiano here assigns a central role to what John Milbank claims is derived from a quasi-sacrificial ontological violence, the sudden breaking in of an abyss which can never be appeased. And Catherine Pickstock argues that such an unmediable difference is coincident with *indifference*, an absolute equivalence which mediates each difference after all. The primacy of death in the postmodern order repeats the hegemony of the homogeneous within modernity itself: nothing is more identical than nothing is to nothing. The claim there can only be death amounts to a claim there can only be identical repetition.<sup>41</sup> Pickstock can be accused of failing to acknowledge here that within the nothing might lurk an indeterminate reserve not identical to the *nihil*, or that there is also an *affirmative* darkness within the postmodern; she is surely correct, however, to charge the more terroristic side of postmodernism with an insouciance, or with too complacent a sublimity in the face of nihilism.

Both Milbank and Pickstock offer a strong counter-model, that of repetition with difference, derived in part from Robert Lowth's eighteenth century reading of Hebrew

poetry (in effect the Old Testament) through the figure of pleonasm, or repetition with variety. Milbank claims this as an anticipation of Derridian supplementarity, but untinged by the abyss of the arche-trace.<sup>42</sup> For both Milbank and Pickstock it is writing which spatializes or fixes the onto-theological rather than the inherent orality of poetic rhythm which they see as the originary pulsing and active passing-on of time.<sup>43</sup> This opens the possibility that the Mariner's act not only provokes an abyss (which at the level of the narrative it certainly does) but that it also encounters a transcendent horizon (which in the sheer desire for relief from narrative repetition it may well do).

Pickstock's work intends a liturgical turn as a revision of the linguistic turn. Milbank explains it thus: since God is not an item in the world to which we might turn (which could be taken to say God is not the sum of our experience of the world), he is only first there for us in our turning to him, a turn entirely contingent and cultural.<sup>44</sup> For the Mariner the divine is not the meaning of his tale but the meaning from, or out of, his tale, the horizon of becoming which implicitly, and in a distinct mode of weakness, accompanies it. Pickstock declares the mystery of the liturgical to be a witness that we only turn to God when he reaches us, by which liturgy comes to be a more fundamental domain than either language or experience, though it remains in itself both linguistic and experiential.<sup>45</sup> It is not pure revision, therefore, but analogous to origin, the fore-intention of the originary which is at one with it throughout a performable series. The person who praises, who walks in a goodly company, is un-estranged but does not thereby claim a fixed identity.<sup>46</sup>

O sweeter than the Marriage-feast

'Tis sweeter far to me

To walk together to the Kirk  
With a goodly company.  
To walk together to the Kirk  
And all together pray... (ll. 634-39)

These familiar lines themselves enact the incremental redundancy of walking to the kirk, a repetition which extends the idea of a goodly company to the idea of a praying one. This choric desire provides a weak frame for the Mariner's own narrative, but it is not so much a containment as the open horizon of that very tale's desire, the Mariner's aspiration to take his tale on a walk no longer identical to its internal logic, but perhaps capable of re-contextualising or supplementing it. In the *Rime* this aspiration is not itself fully narratable, has no actual singular history of its own, but is certainly constitutive for Coleridge's history when he comes to repeat the Mariner's ordeals as his own act of writing. For Pickstock the liturgical non-place is always already situated in God who exceeds the world.<sup>47</sup> The liturgical rite is a series of recommencements, a song for the occasion of a journey or the threshold of a destination, not a final closure. This is no longer a pure anterior essence (an easy target for a De Manian deconstruction of nostalgia), but rather that which is both before *and* after, repeated with difference.<sup>48</sup> The Eucharistic liturgy in particular is a partial imparting, a mode between presence and absence which allows all signs to become con-celebratory according to their own natures.<sup>49</sup> This partiality, this being on behalf of from within partialness, offers a richer way of reading the unstable and less than coherent symbolism of *The Ancient Mariner*, a symbolism which does nonetheless have a function. Here, I believe, Warren was correct, though he categorised the symbolic configurations too rigidly, but does acknowledge what he

himself calls ‘a repetition with a difference’ when describing the ambivalence of the moon imagery between Part III and Part IV. This difference traces a movement within the Mariner from unregeneracy to regeneracy, a proto-liturgical movement of turning towards and finding the moon present in a different way.<sup>50</sup> Analogous identity is always transcendent for Pickstock, so there is always more to come, it is eternity (as it was for Kierkegaard) which is true repetition.<sup>51</sup> The Mariner’s own burdened prophecy calls for relief at the horizon of an other-constituted community, less as a corrective norm than as a supplementary space within which his words might unravel differently, might find continuation rather than blockage. Liturgy so understood by Pickstock is an assurance that all our past actions don’t exceed what is going to happen: it establishes rather than erases the possibility of action. And evening, the vesper time, is the liturgical moment, a time when diurnal human action is made redundant in the diminishing light, giving place to a vulnerable time of maximal exchange between heaven and earth, a time which, as Pickstock says, ensures that prayer introducing the ensuing ‘day’ becomes a gateway to time itself.<sup>52</sup> This is the moment for a positive, differentiating but un-analysable proportionality between time and eternity.<sup>53</sup> The alteration of character through time which the worshipper (or would-be worshipper in the Mariner’s case) undergoes is not dissipation into a nihilistic explosion of differences where connections and resemblances count as nothing. The subject is not separated from its position in the world; rather, there is a perpetual fulfilling of the very possibility of character in and through a transfiguring of the world as such.<sup>54</sup> Drawing on Saint Augustine’s understanding of knowledge as rooted in desire, radical orthodox theology reads the eroticism of our existence as iconic: desire directs us to God.<sup>55</sup> Knowledge of God is mediated by an eschatologically in-formed materiality, one essentially mediated via

an ecclesial body;<sup>56</sup> it is just this which the Mariner longs to be able to affirm on the margins of his tale. For him God has been the icon of a desire his action collided with and usurped; another way of putting this is to suggest his implicit desire for God overruns his capacity to represent God to himself or provokes an iconoclastic outburst, until he discovers within a renewed hunger for liturgy that God exceeds that particular abyss also. The abyss so opened glimpses a further opening-out, until abandonment is crossed by a tracing of the plenitude of becoming.

Am I claiming that a fragmentary liturgical wish or meta-episode on the margins of the *Rime* effectively converts it to a Christian poem? *The Ancient Mariner* is by no means a poem which achieves blessing on its own terms, going little further than to gesture towards what I've characterised as a 'weak' trace of otherness on the margins of its ruling compulsion. The poetry as such remains encapsulated within its own literary Gothicism, within a speculative narrative *frisson* which attains neither closure nor real *denouement*. The poem's ruling motive as it "crosses the line" leads to no resolution, and the complex horizon of a weak conclusion can only hint at a further narrative. The two modes of repetition do achieve divergence, nonetheless, while remaining wholly unequal within that divergence. The afterlife of *The Ancient Mariner* continued to haunt and possess Coleridge, and though not intended as personal allegory he was increasingly prepared to let it become so.<sup>57</sup> The sense that his life was progressively writing itself into the fabric of the *Rime* was nowhere more acute than during the Malta period of 1804-6, a time when his imagination became literally more maritime; it may be no coincidence that this was also the period of Coleridge's emergent Trinitarianism, the turn from a defensively rationalist theology to a consciously more mysterious, and perhaps more existential one. At this period also the *Notebooks* can highlight a search for sympathy, one which was eventually to



become associated with a diseased will: a craving for sympathy at the root of self is anti-redemptive if it becomes the goal of self.<sup>58</sup> At stake here is Coleridge's own imaginative elaboration (a possibly compromising one) of the restlessness of human personality, but this brings with it a necessary sense of the ontological character of imagination, not least when the sheer intensification of experience confronts the problem of evil. Though the nature of that evil remains mysterious and not fully resolvable on the moral plane, nonetheless being a self requires transformation by another.<sup>59</sup> It is at this point that we might regard *The Ancient Mariner* as itself a sort of 'imaginary scripture',<sup>60</sup> particularly in its post 1798 versions; we have the effect of a simulated proof-text, one which glosses its own excess as a species of exemplum. It is as though the full implications of the *Rime* can no longer be embodied in purely poetic terms but call not only for another 'voice' (the 1817 fictive editor) but ultimately for a different form of writing. In that light, the Mariner's espousal of the delight of walking in company to the kirk is a nascent act of will (for the later Coleridge the key to personality), a possible restitution of memory rather than a new order of experience itself.

Coleridge's long journey from his early poetic achievement to his later theological prose is a complex overlapping of rhetorics and by no means a simple reversal or withdrawal. Religious language never ceases to be poetic discourse in Coleridge, and both the poetry and the theological prose are implicated in a common rhetoric, the creative urge to persuade.<sup>61</sup> If Newman could fear Coleridge had reduced the concern for religious truth to the effects of that truth imagined,<sup>62</sup> he reckoned without the interconnected multiplicity of Coleridge's writing practices and their implied beckoning from one to another: already at the close of *The Ancient Mariner* an imaginative text chastens itself with an obliquely distinct rhetoric, one on the verge of

a language of purification and dedication, a poignant witness to the insufficiency of any self-identical vortex of imagination. Such a germinal movement away from excess persona towards a prayerful attentiveness seems to resonate with Coleridge's much later creative theorising of a divine 'personality', itself the generator of alterity and community within the immanent Trinity. For the Coleridge of the *Opus Maximum* and *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* divine personality was the source of distinction in unity, the emergence of alterity from a creative will rather than an oppositional ground.<sup>63</sup> And in *Aids to Reflection* Coleridge would argue not only for a world revealing divine presence but for a world present *to* the divine, and it is this processional sense of towardness which skirts the *Rime* also.<sup>64</sup> In the *Opus Maximum* it is only the fullness of the divine self which is 'wholly and adequately repeated' and it is that 'very repetition [which] contains the distinction from the primary act'.<sup>65</sup> Only in aspiring toward the liturgical can the Mariner rediscover his own lostness, and from within a repetition echoing divine distinction and difference cease to centre that loss obsessively on his own self-narration.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 291, and Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: on the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 181-2.

<sup>3</sup> R. P. Warren, *Selected Essays of Robert Penn Warren* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), pp. 198-305.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>6</sup> See John Spencer Hill, *A Coleridge Companion: an Introduction to the Major Poems and the 'Biographia Literaria'* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 155.

<sup>7</sup> *Selected Essays*, p. 233.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>9</sup> For Edward Bostetter the Mariner's founding act of pride and capricious sadism sets in motion retributive forces of exactly the same nature. He sees the Mariner's incurable remorse as reminiscent of an Evangelical conversion to an unrelenting sense of guilt. Had the Mariner come to believe, like Cowper, that he had committed the unforgivable sin and that all shriving was a lure? See 'The Nightmare World of "The Ancient Mariner"' in *Coleridge: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 65-67.

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Sameness or Difference? Historicist Readings of “The Ancient Mariner”’ in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: Complete, Authoritative Texts of the 1798 and 1817 Versions with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Paul H. Fry (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 187-219.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> Homer Obed Brown praises Warren for recognising that the working of Coleridgean symbolism, implicitly in the poetry and overtly in the theoretical writing, has an ultimate dependence on theological mystery, not to be divorced from Coleridge’s own Biblical criticism, itself of course a theory of reading. See his ‘The Art of Theology and the Theology of Art: Robert Penn Warren’s Reading of Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”’, *Boundary 2* 8 (1979) 237-60.

<sup>13</sup> *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Modiano, p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> See *Coleridge as Poet and Religious Thinker: Inspiration and Revelation* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> ‘An Introduction to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”’ in his *The Dying Gaul and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber:1978), p. 193.

<sup>17</sup> Warren, p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, p. 194.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>21</sup> Modiano, p. 205.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, p. 199.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>28</sup> A point suggested by J. Robert Barth in response to this paper at the Coleridge Summer Conference, Cannington, July 2004. In this context it is interesting to note that John Milbank argues the later medieval stress on a regulatory discipline for recurrent sins is in fact a shift from the early Christian understanding of penance (something undertaken publicly once in a lifetime as part of a transferral to a semi-religious form of life). See *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 291-92.

<sup>29</sup> Modiano, p. 214.

<sup>30</sup> Bostetter, 74.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, 253.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>33</sup> *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*. Ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 212.

<sup>34</sup> Tim Fulford’s insight about enthrallment is relevant here: the Mariner’s life is one of enslavement to superstition, by which he becomes a magnetic figure because he has uncannily touched the dead. See his ‘Conducting the Vital Fluid: the Politics and Poetics of Mesmerism in the 1790’s’ *Studies in Romanticism* 43 (2003) 57-78.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Compulsive Repetition and “The Ancient Mariner”’: Coleridge’s Romantic “Uncanny”’ *Journal of Literary Studies* 6 (1990) 110-11.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, 246.

<sup>37</sup> Bunyan, 120.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Modiano, p. 215.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>41</sup> Pickstock, p. 108.

<sup>42</sup> *Word Made Strange*, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> D. Stephen Long maintains that the argument that truth is contingent on language rather than metaphysical, and therefore no more than the pure product of narrative, seems to denote an originary ontological violence functioning like a transcendental condition for the possibility of knowledge, and no less problematically exceeding its own prescribed contingency. See his ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 130.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Long, p. 136.

<sup>45</sup> Pickstock, p. 181.

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- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257-8.
- <sup>50</sup> Warren, p. 243.
- <sup>51</sup> Pickstock, pp. 266; 271.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.
- <sup>55</sup> Long, p. 139.
- <sup>56</sup> Long, p. 143.
- <sup>57</sup> See Whalley, George, 'The Mariner and the Albatross' in *The Ancient Mariner and Other Poems*, ed. Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1973), p. 177.
- <sup>58</sup> See Graham Davidson, 'Coleridge in Malta' *Coleridge Bulletin* 17 (2001) 86.
- <sup>59</sup> See Stephen Happel, *Coleridge's Religious Imagination* v.3 (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1983), pp. 812-47.
- <sup>60</sup> This phrase is used by Jerome J. McGann in his 'The Meaning of The Ancient Mariner' *Critical Inquiry* 8,1 (1981) 57.
- <sup>61</sup> Happel, p. 873; for the relation of Coleridge's poetic to his later prose, see James D. Boulger, *Coleridge as Religious Thinker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 196-219.
- <sup>62</sup> See McGann, 66.
- <sup>63</sup> For Coleridge on 'personality' see J. Robert Barth, *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p.89; and Mary Anne Perkins, *Coleridge's Philosophy: the Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 208.
- <sup>64</sup> Happel, p. 848.
- <sup>65</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland, with the assistance of Nicholas Halmi (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 199.
- <sup>66</sup> Rowan Williams writes: 'The root fact that I am not "at home" in myself and my world stirs me to desire; but if that desire is a wanting...not to lose the ego's imagined pivotal position, it can only intensify my sense of disease. I have to learn another kind of desire. Authentic desire for change is a desire which puts into question what I now am, recognizing incompleteness, poverty...If I acknowledge lack, I acknowledge an inability to prescribe exactly what will supply that lack.' See his *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2002), p.77.