

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Willing Belief in the Logos of Shakespeare and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

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The following piece is the last we have of Professor Géza Kállay. He could not revise, let alone edit his paper before its publication. Although he had expressed his doubts concerning its “merits” after the conference, and considered it rather a “curiosity”—a curious digression from his ongoing research on Shakespeare and philosophy—the editors wish to pay homage to him by conveying his words as faithfully as they can to transmit, however imperfectly, what Géza calls, in his paper, “voiced animation”. That is, the “heated passion” with which he – like Coleridge or the actors impersonating Shakespeare’s characters—used to “animate the ‘cold,’ arbitrary and conventional symbols [...] of everyday language” in lecture theatres, in seminar and conference rooms. Géza had a “strange power of speech” that used to mesmerise his students and colleagues alike.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner has been haunting me ever since I read it as a second year undergraduate student for one of my favourite professor’s, Professor Kálmán Ruttkay’s class, sometime in the spring of 1981. But the urge to revisit it recently engulfed me when—for an article for *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*—I was looking for metaphysical readers of Shakespeare (among whom, absolutely not accidentally, I welcome, also in my article, one of our distinguished guests at this Conference, Professor Tzachi Zamir). Re-reading

Coleridge's—characteristically haphazard, disorganized but ingenious—notes on Shakespeare, I came across the following passage (in the section entitled “The Drama Generally and the Public Taste”):

Men are now so seldom thrown into wild circumstances, and violences of excitement, that the language of such states, the laws of association of feeling with thought, the starts and strange far-flights of the assimilative power on the slightest and least obvious likeness presented by thoughts, words, or objects,—these are all judged of by authority, not by actual experience,—by what men have been accustomed to regard as symbols of these states, and not the natural symbols, or self-manifestations of them.

Even so it is in the language of man, and in that of nature. The sound *sun*, or the figures *s, u, n*, are purely arbitrary modes of recalling the object, and for visual mere objects they are not only sufficient, but have infinite advantages from their very nothingness *per se*. But the language of nature is a subordinate *Logos*, that was in the beginning, and was with the thing it represented, and it was the thing represented.

Now the language of Shakespeare, in his *Lear* for instance, is a something intermediate between these two; or rather it is the former blended with the latter,—the arbitrary, not merely recalling the cold notion of the thing, but expressing the reality of it, and, as arbitrary language is an heir-loom [a family relic of great value] of the human race, being itself a part of that which it manifests.

Coleridge, continuing this rather brief exposition of a philosophy of language, further concludes—very much in line with the claims above—that the real life of a word is in the actor's mouth, when the actor is performing on stage. Coleridge, talking about the “dead palsy [that is, paralysis] of the public mind,” seems to claim that the actor, through actual performance, is able to animate dead concepts. Thus the actor is capable of doing the same job that the heated, throbbing symbols of poetic language can do when animating the “cold,” arbitrary and conventional symbols

(here: mere signs) of everyday language. Thus, to make words representing “cold notions” come alive we have, it seems, three options:

1. To get into a state of excitement, frenzy, fervour [i.e. intense heat] and in allowing feeling to fly far and high, re-experience the reality behind the notion. This is possible because a host of associations will rush forward and the physical experience of excitement, shaking and moving the spirit, the soul of the human being, will break through the dry, dull and over-used cover of words and will reveal to us the true nature, the reality, of a thing or notion.

2. Resort to poetic language which will poke out something from the Logos; Shakespeare’s language (e.g. in *King Lear*) is capable of that. This is possible because there are two languages (we live in two orders): ordinary language stands for things and notions but it only touches their surfaces, whereas the Logos contains the original nature, the primordial essences of things. Poetic language (in fortunate cases natural symbols) can also penetrate the dull surfaces of overused ordinary words and will pad words from the inside with life. So Shakespeare’s language is in between ordinary words and the Logos; today we would say that according to Coleridge, Shakespeare’s language does its ordinary job of naming and referring but, through its poetic, symbolic power, also takes part in, and thus reveals, the natural, inner reality of the thing or notion. In an outstanding survey of Coleridge’s philosophy of language, Michael O’Neill—in the *Oxford Handbook of Coleridge*—quotes from Coleridge’s work on the *Logos* that “words,” for Coleridge, “are organs of the human soul” (126).

3. Our third option, as we heard, is that we listen to the ordinary words spoken on stage, uttered in heated passion, as described above: and I only add: this is something Plato’s *Ion* talks about. This may be called voiced animation.

The cited remarks on Shakespeare’s Logos prompted me to do some research in Coleridge’s philosophy of language, and—having some background also in linguistics—I soon learned that present-day theoreticians of language consider his claims either mystical and incomprehensible, or downright untenable and false. It is true that Coleridge was an unsystematic and repetitive thinker, like several geniū have been, struggling, for a lifetime, with what cannot—and, for many—should not, be said, and especially not about language, the means of representation itself. It is also true that one can hardly put Coleridge’s philosophy of language into a nutshell, but—at the risk of oversimplification—I will point out some of its features I find important to try to re-read, of course, by no means exhaustively, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

as a dramatization, a re-enactment of the very process of finding a poetic language which is capable of fulfilling the emphatically *philosophical* task of presenting the metaphysical, ultimate essence of things, of notions and of the human being. I hasten to add that, as far as I can tell, *The Rime* does not show these essences directly but indirectly, by presenting the—tentative—conditions and limits of presentation. The text of the *The Rime*, I claim, implies that these conditions and limits are precisely the very essence of the human being. In other words, it is the limits of the never-attained whole whereby we may get a glimpse of our predicament. But, as postmodernists, from Derrida to Stanley Cavell, have warned us, all great works of art call attention to their limits and through those limits prompt us to start working with them, interpreting them.

Limits are certainly convenient starting points but not all works of art see the limits at the same place. I think that in Coleridge's case, the particular limits—which the marginal glosses added to the poem in 1816 call the “Line”—can be detected if the world is seen in terms of verbs instead of nouns, in terms of *dynamis* rather than *stasis*, if language is seen as *Energeia*, energy, rather than *Organon*, tools. It is by noticing these limits that we may give back basic meanings to items in our basic vocabulary, to such words as *see, hear, move, drink, hold, come, love, hospitality*—for Coleridge certainly to the word: *pray*—so that we may have a goal, a purpose, and, thereby, be convinced that it makes sense to go on living. I mention *hospitality* (“The ancient Mariner inhospitably kills the pious bird of good omen,” says the gloss at the end of Part I) because a Conference-organizer cannot remind himself enough of that. I would like to read *The Rime* as displaying the price we have to pay for authentic presentation, for a new language. It is only if those prices are paid that we may reckon with the possibility of taking part in, and cheer at a real celebration at, for example, a Wedding. I consider a Wedding a promise of life even without the prospect of children because in real partnership, I believe, two people are always more than 1+1.

In a brilliant chapter on “Allegory and Symbol,” also in the *Oxford Handbook of Coleridge*, Professor Nicholas Halmi warns us that it was “only by 1816” that Coleridge considered the defining characteristic of the symbol the grounding of its representational function in a relation of ontological participation. “For only when he began to assert—Professor Halmi writes—that the symbol is a part of what it represents, did [Coleridge] also begin to differentiate it from allegory.” So, at the time of the

first composition of *The Rime*, Coleridge was not thinking in terms of natural symbol—somehow metonymically—participating in essences. Yet I wish to claim that, at least when he gives an account of the compositional circumstances of *The Rime* in *Biographia Literaria*, the role of the symbol is given to “poetic faith,” i.e. “the willing suspension of disbelief,” while the “supernatural” corresponds to “essence.” But, in spite of the dates, we should recall that *The Rime* was a point of reference for its Author all through his life; he had a very troubled journey with it first induced by Wordsworth in the 2nd edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and there are no less than 18 versions of it: Coleridge kept rewriting it, reworking it, retelling it, again and again. Leslie Stephen, Virginia Wolf’s father was right when he said: “The germ of all [of Coleridge’s] utterances can be found [...] in the *Mariner*.” In a way, the Mariner, “the grey-beard loon” remained a life-long “old Navigator” for Coleridge, as (according to Wordsworth’s notes dictated to Izabella Fenwick) they called the Mariner between themselves when planning the composition of the poem, originally together.

I think it is important to remember that the pieces in *Lyrical Ballads* were, indeed, both experimental and programmatic, as already Wordsworth’s “Advertisement” in the 1st edition indicates, and although this is one of only a few places where Wordsworth talks about language in connection to his program (“[These poems] were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure”), language was central to this program: testing the power of poetic expression, asking what language is capable of. *Lyrical Ballads* wishes to investigate, through demonstration and performance, in the words of the Ancient Mariner, the “strange power of speech.”

As it is well known, in the famous 14th chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, almost 20 years after the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge finally tries to formulate both programs, Wordsworth’s just as much as his own. Coleridge assigns to his one-time friend the agenda we may call, after Victor Shklovsky, defamiliarization. As for his own part, the program is trying to produce such an effect in the reader which makes her suspend, at least momentarily, disbelief as regards the reality of supernatural beings. Both programs are thus reader-oriented and aim at providing the reader with a chance to participate in the supernatural. Wordsworth’s curriculum is:

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to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.

The length of the sentence and its picturesqueness aside, this is a possible formulation of one of the agendas of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: to reinterpret the ordinary, including everyday reality, which is inaccessible because it is so obvious, trivial, well-known, and even boring: it is closer to us than our hands. By revisiting and re-acquainting, literally, re-*cognizing* them, we give them life again, we re-animate them. Thus, we may reach the *extraordinary* of the ordinary.

Coleridge's program aims at the supernatural directly, as one may aim at an Albatross with a cross-bow:

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. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.

To paraphrase: this way of participating in the supernatural allows into, or even recommends for, the story, supernatural agencies, like "fiends," "slimy things that did crawl with legs upon the slimy sea," "death-fires," "a Spirit" "ninefathom deep" following the ship, i.e. a Spirit, who is neither a "departed soul, nor an angel," but is an "invisible inhabitant of the earth" about whom the "learned Jew, Josephus" and the "Platonic Michael Psellus" "may be consulted." This Spirit later turns out to be the "Polar Spirit," assigning the Mariner "penance long and heavy," as two "inhabitants of the element" point out. Further supernatural agencies are a "ship that comes onward without wind or tide," "the western wave all a-flame," a "skeleton

ship with bars” or “ribs,” a “spectre-bark,” “DEATH” and “LIFE-IN-DEATH” “casting dice,” souls flying out with the whizz of the cross-bow, the “horrible curse in the dead men’s eyes,” “water burning away,” “water-snakes,” “blest spirits,” “sweet sounds” passing through the mouths of dead men, “angelic souls,” a man “all light,” i.e. a “seraph-man.” These are strictly the inhabitants of the Sea. And supernatural events also abound at sea, like the ship moving very fast driven by the Polar Spirit, or the ship not moving at all; it is either unbearably hot or terribly cold, the water is either “everywhere” or there is no (drinking) water at all, either everything, and especially the mouth is totally dry, and even water burns away, or the mariner is soaking wet. We should have “poetic faith” in these beings and incidents, we have to suppose they are *real*, we should look at them *as if* they were real. They are created by the imagination, and the relationship to them, in the willing suspension of disbelief, is described as dramatic, i.e. conflicting, consisting of turns (perhaps turns of belief and disbelief). It is then that we may participate in the *truth* of the supernatural.

What is the ontological status of the supernatural? As I interpret Coleridge’s lines in the *Biographia*: they are created in the modality of the subjunctive. After *as if* we use the Past Subjunctive in English, “as if it were” or “had been”; *as if* occurs three times *The Rime*, the most famous being: “As if it [i.e. the Albatross] had been a Christian soul.” Grammatically, the Present Subjunctive is the infinitive without *to*, e.g. “God save the Queen,” and after certain verbs and expressions: “Let there be light,” “It is vital that you switch off the light” etc. The Subjunctive is volitional, and it is more than the ‘wishing mood:’ ‘if only I survived all these adventures!’ In the subjunctive mood reality is not yet there as an accomplishment, but the speaker wants it so much that she is able to already see it “with her mind’s eye”; the Subjunctive is the “creational mood,” as in “Let there be light!” The willing suspension of disbelief then is going from “as if,” and from “Let there be,” to fact: *it is*. “It is an ancient Mariner”—so the poem starts. Whatever one says in the realm of the supernatural, her language is padded, from the inside, with the subjunctive mood. This testing the expressivity, the power of speech may help us realize that even when we refer to facts, when we describe things, the subjunctive mood does not entirely leave us: we lend stability and identity to reality in the subjunctive, we wish that it would not substantially change, move, alter while we are talking about it.

What is one’s conditioned attitude, her basic ontological relation to the supernatural? The Mariner can see all the horror and the grace of the supernatural in

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being in *medial* relationship with it. The *medial* (sometimes called by grammars *inchoative* or *ergative*) can be exemplified by such uses of verbs as *The cup broke*, *The sky darkened*, *The barrel leaks*, *The Albatross died*. The sentence has a subject, of course (cup, sky, barrel) but they are not agents; they are passive sufferers of the events, even more so than in passive voice: *The cup was broken by the cat*; *The sky was darkened by clouds*, while *The barrel leaks* and *The Albatross died*, cannot even be transformed, keeping the respective verbs *leak* and *die*, into passive sentences (which shows that there are degrees of mediality). As early as in the Preface to the 2nd edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth noted—as one of the defects of *The Rime*—that the Mariner “does not act” and it is true that he experiences his own story medially: the only single instance when he is an agent is when he kills the Albatross: “With my cross-bow / I killed the ALBATROSS.” The medial aspect of the Mariner is the mirror of the subjunctive mood on the poet’s (and, under favourable circumstances, the Reader’s) part. Even the great turn, the blessing of the water-snakes, happens, according to the Mariner himself, without him being aware of the act: “And I blessed them unaware.” The ballad poem also contains its audience, its first readers within the poem, first and foremost the Wedding Guest, and then, at the end of the story, the “Hermit good,” the Pilot and the “Pilot’s boy.” The Wedding Guest is “spell-bound,” mesmerized, “He cannot choose but hear,” the Hermit asks “what manner of a man” the Mariner is, and silently disappears from the story, the Pilot and the Pilot’s boy disappear, too; the first “shrieks and falls down in a fit,” the second “goes crazy,” “laughing loud and long”: they are recipients also in the medial and cannot do anything with the story and its narrator.

Thus, in startling contrast to this overall mediality, it is activity which is murderous, as if using ordinary words to describe, to characterise, to understand, to grasp things and notions willingly were equal to killing them, to quench the fire in their souls, to turn them into inanimate objects, dead things. According to this understanding, there is no real “motive” for murdering the bird other than our motivation to speak, to communicate, to use ordinary words; we cannot help but kill, “unaware,” when we make use of our everyday language. If we (our souls) do not participate in the Logos of Shakespeare, or if we do not take part in the supernatural, if we do not experience all the extremes (extreme cold, hot, dry, moist, etc.), which extremes are also capable of breaking the dull surfaces of the everyday, if we do not suspend our disbelief, we cannot even hope for giving back the original meanings to our

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basic vocabulary of life, from *live* to *die*, from *hear* to *speak*, from *stand* to *move*, and so on. The Mariner singles out *love* and *pray* at the end: “He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small.” This might be the simplicity of a “three years’ child” (this is how the Wedding Guest is listening to the Ancient Mariner at the beginning of the story) but this is a second “innocence,” when we may start to learn to move and speak again.