The Romantic Quest for Identity: Re-reading the First Part of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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Abstract – This paper proposes a re-reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poetic masterpiece, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, in an attempt to deepen the critical discussion about one of the major themes explored in the poem, that is, the search for identity. In particular, this attempt will consist of a close reading of the first section of the ballad, inasmuch as it contains the fundamental pattern of the whole text. The conceptual framework underlying this analysis is based on Coleridge’s key principle of “the coincidence of opposites”, which the Author develops in his critical work ‘Biographia Literaria’. Indeed, the whole of Coleridge’s oeuvre is permeated by the idea of a dialectical tension between contrary forces, which struggle against each other so as to be joined, at last, in the dynamic unity of a superior harmony. In the light of this conception, the Romantic quest for identity takes the form of a struggle between two opposing forces: the impact of otherness with its confounding effects on the one side, and the irrepressible aspiration towards a unified self on the other. Such a conflicting dynamics appears to structure the entire ballad, starting from the incipit of the poem and involving all the characters – especially the two opposite figures of the ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest.

Keywords - S. T. Coleridge; The Rime of the Ancient Mariner; Romantic quest; identity; otherness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, acknowledged masterpiece of English Romantic poetry (Empson, 1964)[10], has lent itself to a multiplicity of scholarly approaches since Samuel Taylor Coleridge published the definitive edition of The Rime in 1817 (Fry, 1999a[12]; Boulger, 1969[1]). Especially the second half of the 20th century saw a proliferation of critical studies which explored Coleridge’s narrative poem from different theoretical standpoints, such as the new historicism (Fry, 1999b[13]), psychoanalytic criticism (Fry, 1999c)[14], deconstruction (Fry, 1999d)[15], reader-response criticism (Fry, 1999e)[16]. One of the major themes explored in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is undoubtedly the question concerning the identity of the main character, largely analysed through the lens of psychoanalytic theory (Waldoff, 1971; Rubinstein, 1990[33][40]; Fry, 1999g[18]).

This paper is an attempt to re-read The Rime of the Ancient Mariner following the thread of Coleridge’s concept of “the coincidence of opposites”, which can be traced back to Giordano Bruno’s principle of coincidentia oppositorum (Wheeler, 2010: 47-58)[43]. Indeed, Coleridge’s entire conception is permeated by the idea of a dialectical tension between contrary forces, which struggle against each other so as to be joined, at last, in the dynamic unity of a superior harmony. One might affirm that the so-called coincidence of opposites constitutes the structural principle of Coleridge’s poetic universe, as clearly witnessed in his most famous work (Owen, 1962)[29]. A significant example of the effectiveness of this principle can be found in the double view adopted in The Rime, which is symbolic and realistic at the same time (Chandler, 1965[3]; Dick, 1973[9]; Grow, 1973[21]). The two modalities not only interact in the general development of the narrative poem, but they also achieve integration with such powerful synergy to arouse in the reader “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (Biographia Literaria, 314).

In the light of the above, the Romantic quest for identity takes the form of a struggle between two opposing forces: the impact of otherness with its confounding effects on the one side, and the insuppressible aspiration towards a unified self on the other. Such a conflicting dynamics appears to structure the entire ballad, starting from the incipit of the poem and involving all the characters – especially the two opposite figures of the ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest.

2. THE DRAMATIC INCIPIT OF THE POEM

Italo Calvino reminds us that every re-reading of a classic is always a new experience (Calvino, 1995: 7)[2]. It is, however, quite rare that this impression of novelty emerges with immediate intensity; it is unusual that it surprises us with such vivid and palpable evidence, as happens every time that we approach Coleridge’s poetic masterpiece.
The Mariner is immediately perceived as an inopportune presence, an outsider, a veritable intruder in the context of the wedding feast, while the young interlocutor declares his identity precisely in connection with that context: “I am next of kin”. He claims to be a close relation of the bridegroom, thus emphasizing the relationship that ties him to a social group and makes him part of a community. It is up to him, therefore, to introduce the scenario of the wedding feast, an exemplary metaphor for every bond of alliance and communion among mankind. It is up to the wedding guest to recompose the ritual in which he aspires to have a place – the ceremony of marriage – in order to be confirmed in his own identity (Larkin, 2007)[25].

3. SINGULAR OTHERNESS VS COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

It is essential, at this point, to analyse more closely some meanings implicit in the initial dialogical and descriptive sequence, often considered as a mere frame narrative and consequently pushed into the background. The scene that opens the ballad and describes the dramatic encounter between the ancient Mariner and the young man takes place on the threshold of a wedding feast. The doors of the hall are open wide to welcome all those who are “invited”.

Besides, the social roles are clearly defined, as witnessed by the recurring expression “Wedding-Guest”, indicating one who is destined to take part in this great ritual of human society. A brief prose gloss in an antique English, placed at the beginning of the poem, resumés the content of the first three stanzas (Wall, 1987)[41]:

An ancient Mariner meeteth three Gallants bidden to a wedding-feast, and detaineth one. (The Rime, p. 49)

Here there is a semantic nuance that is worth-noting. The three young men are invited (“bidden”) to a wedding feast: where the use of the archaic verb “to bid”, implying the meaning of order, command, calls to mind consolidated, binding conventions. In other words, what is considered a social obligation within the community is ordered with formal courtesy. At the same time the syncopated, scanned rhythm of the verses, accentuated by the use of the internal rhyme (“The guests are met, the feast is set”) contributes to produce the effect of a ritual succession of actions, implying the idea of an established structure of things, of an ordered sequence to be respected (Payne, 1978)[31].

Interestingly, right from the beginning of the poem, certain modules and stylistic elements characteristic of medieval ballads – the use of archaisms, the insertion of glosses in prose with an explicative function, the internal rhyme – are elements that work together to evoke a set of codified traditions and normative models of social life. It is also worth noting that the Mariner meets “three Gallants bidden to a wedding-feast”, where the number three symbolically represents a minimal nucleus of people in a reciprocal relationship, recalling the principle of an organized collectivity. Moreover, the use of the archaic noun “Gallants”, evocative of courteous and gallant contexts,
suffices to introduce an idea of strong conventionality (Sonmez, 2002)[35]. Thus, the threshold of the ballad configures itself as a sort of ritual dimension which regulates forms of behaviour and validates them within a reference group. In this way the subjectivity of each individual person is absorbed into the collective identity of a social organism. It is evident, therefore, that the wedding feast assumes its full meaning of ritual, inasmuch as it consecrates the primeval bond of union: that bond in which the entire community is called upon to recognize the principle of all social cohesion and growth. Thus the three young men are invited to take part in the wedding feast (“bidden to a wedding feast”).

It is precisely against this background of organized sociality and this network of customs that the figure of the Other suddenly bursts in. The unknown bursts on the scene with its disquieting and disturbing appearance, questioning the solid, invincible conviction of our identity, that is, of our existence here and now. In effect, the Mariner attracts his interlocutor beyond the confines of the visible and audible, taking him out of the context of the wedding feast and dilating time and space through the infinite narration of his endless wandering (Rubasky, 2004)[32].

It is here, where for the Wedding Guest it is important to be present in his social role, that his personal identity is questioned. The Other is the one who breaks conventional schemes of social life, overturning the established order by his only presence, inevitably interfering on the reassuring ways of cherished traditions and customs. The ancient Mariner’s first action is to “stop one of three”, thus creating a division within the group of friends, stopping only one of the guests and preventing him from following his natural path. The impulsiveness and force of the action give rise to a situation of strong conflict, which is expressed in the dramatic contrast of the first three stanzas (Melville, 2004)[28]. And while the young man tries to free himself from the Mariner’s hold, the latter begins his magic tale:

_He holds him with his skinny hand,_
_‘there was a ship’, quoth he._
_‘Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!’_
_Eftsoons his hand dropt he. (The Rime, 9-12)_

“There was a ship”: the mythical and fairy-tale beginning immediately opens a dimension of total otherness in time and space, thus beginning the extraordinary and unique story of the ancient Mariner (Mc Gann, 1981)[27]. However, from the narrator’s perspective, it is a story of guilt and expiation containing the very sense of his existence and of his wandering from land to land, like Cain and the Wandering Jew (Fulmer, 1969)[19]. It is his personal story, which he is obliged to relive every time with intimate torment. It is “his tale”, as the gloss to _The Rime_ makes clear: in other words, the myth of a unique and singular experience is set against the great rite of sociality. Precisely in the unrepeatable uniqueness of what he has lived, precisely in what separates him from the civil association with other men, the ancient Mariner recognizes his own identity.

### 4. THE OTHERNESS OF NATURE

The ancient Mariner’s tale of guilt and expiation unwinds through a surprisingly varied series of unexpected turns and radical transformations in the exterior scene, as in the inner and personal condition of the first-person narrator. However, the decisive event of the story, the raison d’être of the Mariner’s unending wandering is the killing of the Albatross (Foakes, 2001)[11]. This action against nature and life determines the separation of the Mariner from all the other living beings, from all created realities; this is the wound that makes him extraneous to himself, being etched on his face as the distinctive sign of an irreducible otherness (Gill, 1981)[20]. This crucial event, on which depend all the successive developments of the story, is to be found at the very end of the first section of the poem. Significantly, it is here, in conjunction with the killing of the Albatross, that the individuality of the Mariner emerges for the first time as an absolute singularity: “I shot the Albatross.” It is worth pausing to consider in particular this first part of the Rime, which functions as a matrix for the entire poem (Fry, 1999)[17]. The voyage begins under the best auspices, in the festive atmosphere of an adventure that is both mythical and modern, described through symbolic and realistic elements:

_The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,_
_merrily did we drop_
_below the kirk, below the hill,_
_below the lighthouse top_.’ (The Rime, 21-24)

On leaving the harbour, the ship is presented immediately as a microcosm: the crew is named with an inclusive first person pronoun, about to be launched on the historical route of circumnavigation of the world, described with rigorous topographic precision. In re-evoking the moment of departure, the narrator reveals the emotion common to all the sailors (“did we drop”), as they see the familiar symbols of their country disappear beyond the horizon. In this first scene the crew is perceived as one man as the ship sails southwards, heading to the Equator. The first event that intervenes to modify the conditions of the voyage is the arrival of a hurricane, which, for its violence, is personified as the enemy:

_And now the Storm-Blast came, and he_ was tyrannous and strong: _he struck with his o’ertaking wings, and chased us south along._

_With sloping masts and dipping prow, as who pursued with yell and blow still treads the shadow of his foe, and forward bends his head, the ship drove fast, loud roared the blast, and southward aye we fled._

_(The Rime, 41-50)_
At length did cross an Albatross, thorough the fog it came; as if had been a Christian soul, we hailed it in God’s name.

It ate the food it ne’er had eat, and round and round it flew. The ice did split with a thunder-fit; the helmsman steered us through! (The Rime, 63-70)

“Thorough the fog it came”: penetrating the curtain of fog and sleet that totally blocks out the horizon, beyond all possible expectations, the Albatross comes as a divine sign, as the silent word of the invisible. Foreign to all that surrounds it, the Albatross follows the ship and takes part in the life of the crew. Its existence – the mere fact of being there for the sailors – is an event of absolute, irreducible singularity. With its sudden appearance, with its silent following the ship, with its punctual return every day like a tacit appointment, the Albatross affirms its sovereign freedom, revealing its inner self. It represents a symbol of the divine life that pervades the universe, being in harmony with all the elements of the creation, and yet not comparable to any of them (Guo-qing, 2006)[22]. In its surprising and unexpected arrival, in its heterogeneous presence, in its being there, the Albatross expresses its own unique, unrepeatable identity. Suddenly, without any explanation, the ancient Mariner shoots the great sea-bird with his cross-bow:

‘God save thee, ancient Mariner! from the fiends, that plague thee thus! — Why look’st thou so?’ — ‘With my cross-bow I shot the Albatross.’ (The Rime, 79-82)

The unspeakable guilt on which the whole poem is based is the senseless killing of the Albatross. However rash and unmotivated this act may seem, the Mariner recognizes his own personal responsibility by confessing his sacrilegious deed: “With my cross-bow / I shot the Albatross” (lines 81-82). Significantly, with these words the first part of the ballad concludes. As already pointed out, it is the first time that the first person singular pronoun occurs in the poem, isolating the individuality of the narrator and thus detaching the identity of the ancient Mariner from the rest of the crew. On the verbal level, then, the protagonist feels guilty for the crime committed, declaring it with dramatic incisiveness. But the Mariner’s countenance, and in particular his gaze, reveals the inner torment he feels when he recalls his sacrilegious act. It is significant, in this regard, the frightened reaction of the Wedding Guest: his allusion to the demons that “plague” the Mariner’s soul evokes the disquieting image of a split personality, of a divided self.

Thus, the first part of Coleridge’s Rime dramatically ends with the protagonist slaying the sea-bird. At this crucial point, however, the reader will have understood that, for the ancient Mariner, the act of killing the Albatross has meant to murder a part of his own inner self (Sikora, Shelley, Don Kuiken, Miall, 2010)[34]. Throughout the
subsequent sections of the narrative poem, the Mariner’s tale will outline a veritable inner voyage that configures itself as a personal search for identity. The turning point in this spiritual quest is represented by the pivotal part of the Rime, that is the fourth, where the Mariner’s interior agony reaches its acme in the vain and repeated attempt to pray, and especially in his inability to die: “and yet I could not die” (line 262). However, the most eloquent expression of the tormenting effects of the divided self is to be found in the final part of the poem, where the Hermit asks the Mariner the crucial question on his identity: “what manner of man art thou?” (line 577). Upon that question the Mariner is seized by an atrocious agony, which compels him to tell his story:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
that agony returns,
and till my ghastly tale is told,
this heart within me burns. (The Rime, 582-585)

The ancient Mariner is thus revealed as one who has dramatically experienced, in his deepest interiority, the struggle against his other self. It is here, in this returning agony, in this unending struggle with the Other, recognized every time as more intimate to him than himself, that the true identity of the character lies.

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