

## 1. Introduction

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* "a grey-beard loon" (11)<sup>1</sup> of an Ancient Mariner shares a personal past experience of a shockingly unearthly world at sea with a young innocent man on his way to a wedding. With his "glittering eye" (13) and "strange power of speech" (587) the Ancient Mariner fixes the Wedding-Guest's attention to his spectral ordeals "Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea" (232-33). The Mariner's narrative of his encounters with a nature full of furious arrogance, beauty and supernatural beings is unintelligibly otherworldly, but he renders it comprehensible to the Wedding-Guest, with the help of a rich use of Christian metaphors.

Much of the complexity in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* springs from the marriage between an uncanny universe and Christian symbolism. The poem's air has elements of both the pagan and the Christian. By its capriciousness and supernatural machinery, the *Rime* has affinities with Greek mythology and especially with the Homeric epic of the *Odyssey* (Boulger 7), and at the same time, the poem relies heavily on Christian symbolism in conveying its manifest or surface meaning. The themes and motifs of both Greek mythology and Christian doctrine give *The Rime* an atmosphere of uncertainty in which one is confounded as to the fundamental metaphysical universe of the poem. Is the poem set in an ordered cosmos, governed by Providence? Or is the world of the poem at the mercy of mere Chance, a game of dice? Acknowledging the hues of Greek mythology brings notions of chaos, randomness and mercurial volatility to the poem. By asserting the Christian images, on the other hand, the world of the

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from the poem are taken from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition.

poem will, through snares and toils, in the end emerge as unified, purposeful and harmonious, but only barely.

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a poem characterized by various dichotomies, ranging from metaphysical assumptions about the world to suggestions as to how to interpret these possible worlds through the poetical structuring of the work. One major dichotomy is that between land and sea. The realm of land represents the ordinary world, where common sense is at work, logic is sound and where reason is in harmony with existence. It is a realm of weddings and joy and community. Where land could be said to stand for culture, the realm of the sea will stage nature, in which supernatural beings have their dwelling place. The world of the sea is unpredictable, it follows the rules of dreams rather than reason. The uncanny region of the sea is a place of isolation, alienation and loneliness, it is disconnected from anything like home. The Ancient Mariner embodies the realm of the sea. Wherever he is, the Mariner finds himself in a sea state of mind. Wherever he treads, he carries with him his maritime experiences as heavy to bear as vast masses of oceanic water. With his appearance and behavior, which have been carved by the sea, the Mariner frightens the Wedding-Guest, who represents the realm of land.

Another dichotomy of importance in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is that between the gloss and the ballad. This division marks a distinction between the “active persona” of the Scribe from the other two “active personae” in *The Rime*; the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest (Richards-Fisher 63). The Scribe’s relationship to the ballad is that of a self appointed mouthpiece, with the agenda of magnifying the Christian frame of reference in which the Mariner tells his tale. To refer to the above mentioned land / sea duality of the poem, the Scribe is deeply rooted on land, and as a further move away

from nature, he is one that spends his days inside his study with piles of books to accompany him, assumed as he is, to be “a scholar and an antiquarian” (McGann 41). In his orthodox Christian frame of mind the Scribe directs the ballad away from the uncanny and into a “safer zone of (proper) interpretation” (Mahmutovic 96). The power of the Scribe to instruct the reader points to another dichotomy, whose function in the poem is to accommodate two different readings—one guided by the Scribe and the other one guided by the Wedding-Guest (Richards-Fisher 68). Whereas the Scribe’s *Rime* is concerned with keeping the Mariner’s world familiar, the reading focused on the Wedding-Guest, on the other hand, confronts the uncanny atmosphere of the poem, rather than glossing over it. It is a reading that challenges one to follow the Wedding-Guest to the shore, who in his turn has followed the Mariner out into deep waters.

Initially, the Wedding-Guest too, firmly stands on land. But towards the very end of the poem, after having heard the Mariner’s tale, the Wedding-Guest becomes to represent a merging between the two worlds of sea and land, by slowly arriving at a point where he is able to envision that vast seascape beyond man’s control. Having been spell-bound by the Mariner’s “glittering eye”, the Wedding-Guest himself has now been given the power of a greater vision, a vision so great and bewildering that the Wedding-Guest, as the poem ends, emerges as “one that hath been stunned, / And is of sense forlorn: / A sadder and a wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn” (622-25). A vision astounding enough to stun and cast a young man into a daze, a vision strong enough to not only bring about wisdom but also sadness—what this vision portends, I will attempt to answer in this essay. But more importantly, I will also show that, ultimately, the Wedding-Guest does not arrive at the Ancient Mariner’s sagacious and broad level of understanding the meaning of this vision.

The universe of the poem that simultaneously alludes to both Greek and Biblical mythology has, not surprisingly, split critics into two general interpretative leagues. Critics opting to stay within the conceptual safe haven of solid land, emphasize the Biblical images and rely on the comments of the Scribe in their interpretations. In contrast to the Christian interpreters one can discern a school of interpretation that navigates out to the frightening region of the sea and is sensitive to the atmosphere of the fundamentally absurd world of Greek mythology that *The Rime* is charged with. These critics will often claim the Wedding-Guest to be the ideal reader of *The Rime*, by stressing his transformation into a wiser and sadder man by the end of the Mariner's tale. What this transformative wisdom entails is usually euphemized into platitudes such as realizing a frightening beauty, greatness, and uneasy depth of reality anew. To my knowledge no critic has bluntly used the word *absurd* for defining the world as it is conveyed by the Mariner. In this essay, however, I will not shy away from the term absurd, because I will elaborate upon the absurd in such a direction that rather than it standing for unreason, it will represent a lucidity of thought.

Whereas critical readings that focus on the Wedding-Guest's alteration tend to round off their interpretation when reaching the notion of the unmentioned absurd, I will instead take it as my point of departure, and for this reason I will in my reading concentrate on the Mariner, rather than on the Wedding-Guest. It is, after all, the Mariner's experience around which the poem centers, it is the Mariner's reported Epiphany of the absurd that rocks the young man's world, and ultimately, it is the Mariner's acceptance of the absurd, not the Wedding-Guest's, which lies at the core of the poem.

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, I will show, is neither a parable of the Christian myth of Fall and Redemption, nor a disillusioned Mariner's attempt at talking therapy with the result of bringing his auditor into disillusionment too, but rather a sage's appeased acceptance of an absurd world. By placing the Mariner's shooting of the Albatross, his penance and pivotal blessing of the water-snakes—which I see as the actual act of acceptance—within a philosophical discourse of the absurd as outlined by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), I hope to contribute with a reading of *The Rime* that is both absurd and constructive at the same time. Just as the legendary Sisyphus in the end not only accepts but also finds meaning in the eternal rock-pushing to which he has been damned by the Gods, I see the Ancient Mariner accepting and reconciling with his fate of wandering the earth in eternity, telling his tale.

But before arriving at an Epiphany of the absurd and a blessed acceptance of that very condition, the *Ancient Mariner* must first pass through the inevitable Christian frame which surrounds the poem. What follows is therefore a chapter on the Christian setting of *The Rime* that lays the ground for Christian symbolist interpretations. In the subsequent chapter *The Rime* will be discussed within its classically absurd framework of its dreamlike quality and its aspects of Greek mythology, where crime and punishment seem as incongruent as a ship moving without wind. Finally, in the last chapter, I will present my reading of *The Rime* as an enriching poem of acceptance of an absurd world.

## 2. The Inevitable Christian Framework

### *of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

It is an affirmatively Christian world one meets when first entering *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, as the poem opens with a scene where people are gathering to celebrate the sacrament of matrimony; “The Bridegroom’s doors are opened wide, /.../ The guests are met, the feast is set: / May’st hear the merry din” (5, 7-8). In the middle of all this commotion the Ancient Mariner stops one of the guests and lures him into listening to his wondrous story of life on a ship. As the Mariner leaves land, so to speak, and takes the Wedding-Guest along with him to the sea-voyage of his tale, the Christian background becomes less dominant and less absolute, as various demons of the elements begin to appear. Gradually, the Catholic Christian context becomes part of the overall “polytheological economy” (Dilworth 525) of the poem’s universe, and it does so elegantly, and without any friction—indeed, with all its rites and ceremonies Catholicism resembles superstitious behavior to such an extent that Coleridge observed that “Catholics practice more superstition than morals...[;] Supererogation; the invocation of saints; power of relics, &c. &c.” (Dilworth 525)<sup>2</sup>

The polytheological charge of *The Rime* aside, one must, nevertheless, frankly acknowledge a systematic Catholic background in the poem. Humphry House confirms this point efficiently:

Across this whole system of daemons of the elements and angelic spirits lies the framework of ordinary Catholic theology—Christ and Mary Queen of Heaven, and in the ending the ordinary Catholic practices of confession, absolution and church-going. (Boulger 52)

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<sup>2</sup> Supererogation “is the Catholic doctrine that a person can perform good acts beyond what is required by God for salvation” (Dilworth 525.)

In spite of this apparently Christian blueprint, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was received with puzzling bewilderment, as a “rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence” (Modiano 40) when it first appeared in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. The poem’s original obscurity on the levels of both language and meaning, was made less impenetrable by Coleridge in later versions. In *The Ancient Mariner: A Poet’s Reverie* from 1800 the archaisms from the original version were removed, rendering the diction more accessible, and in the final *Sibylline Leaves* version of 1817 *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* had been supplemented with a marginal gloss (Richards-Fisher 63).

The purpose and effect of the marginal gloss have been vividly debated. Critics prepared to address the uncanny strangeness in *The Rime* tend to regard the gloss as a tainting burden on the poem. Among the highest voices against the glosses is William Empson who goes as far as to calling the gloss a “parasitic growth” (Modiano 44) and a “greasy bit of sanctimoniousness in the margin” (Empson 157).

What is generally objected to in the marginal gloss is its function of moralistically simplifying the ballad, on the one hand, and sanctifying it, on the other. But not only that; at times it neither adds nor clarifies anything, as when the Mariner tells us: “And now the storm-blast came, and he / Was tyrannous and strong: / He struck with his overtaking wings, / And chased us south along” (41-44), and the Scribe feels compelled to explain: “The ship driven by a storm toward the south pole”. This redundant gloss reveals the Scribe’s ostentatious need to show thorough understanding—yet delivering no more than what is already at hand. A classic example of the Scribe’s moralistic agenda is the gloss to the lines where the Mariner says he shot the Albatross (79-82): “The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen.” To inhospitably kill a pious bird is horrid, indeed, but as a comment it is

superfluous as the laconic, “With my cross-bow / I shot the Albatross” is so much more stinging. The religious activity of the Scribe can be found in the gloss to the stanza where the Mariner awakes to the reality that it has rained: “The silly buckets on the deck, / That had so long remained, / I dreamt that they were filled with dew; / And when I awoke, it rained” (297-300). Without support from the Mariner’s words, the Scribe piously paraphrases this neutral stanza thus: “By grace of the holy Mother, the ancient Mariner is refreshed with rain”. Finally, when the Mariner first watches the water-snakes moving “in tracks of shining white” (274) the Scribe explains with Christian zeal: “By the light of the Moon he beholdeth God’s creatures of the great calm”. With this gloss the Scribe specifically calls to the reader’s Christian sensitivity, as the Mariner’s immediately subsequent blessing of the water-snakes will, through metonymy, imply that the Mariner blesses not only the water-snakes, but all of God’s creatures and all of his Creation.

But to be fair, one must nevertheless acknowledge that it is not only the Scribe who sugarcoats the eeriness of the ballad. The Mariner too, contributes to the Christian vocabulary of the poem. Raimonda Modiano has convincingly shown how the Mariner, who desperately needs the Wedding-Guest to listen to his tale in order to escape his loneliness, adapts his language to the Wedding-Guest’s world (47). At the beginning the Mariner uses the physical force of holding the Wedding-Guest “with his skinny hand” (9) and tries to mesmerize him with his “glittering eye” to make him listen, and soon enough “He cannot choose but hear” (18). But in order to maintain his auditor’s attention throughout his tale, the Mariner has to color his fantastic story with metaphors and modes of expression borrowed from Christian mythology. To render his tale comprehensible and meaningful to listen to, the Mariner has to “find Christian



equivalents in his mysteriously demonic universe and [so] begins to draw upon orthodox analogies to characterize unique experiences” (Modiano 52).

The most obvious thematic analogy to Christian mythology is the dead sea-bird’s relationship to the cross. It grounds the Christian context of the poem, or as Modiano asserts: “The exchange of the cross for the slain Albatross summons...Christian doctrine as a mythological frame of reference” (54). Indeed, when the Mariner says “Instead of the cross, the Albatross, / About my neck was hung” (141-42) one has no choice but to acknowledge the crucifix; the very ur-symbol of Christianity.

The Christian background of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is apparent. In addition to being framed by the celebration of the Catholic sacrament of matrimony, all three “active personae” in the poem contribute to the Christian discourse. The Scribe provides a marginal gloss that emphasizes the Christian meaning of the ballad and the Wedding-Guest’s uneasiness prompts the Mariner to use Christian images in illustrating his experience. The reason why the Ancient Mariner chooses to employ a Christian vocabulary is, I suggest, because he has no other choice. The only language available to him from which he cannot escape is a Christian archetypal language; a collectively inherited subconscious pattern of metaphors.<sup>3</sup>

As it is a tale told in a Christian world of every-day life, structured by Christian rituals, and furthermore, a tale told in a Christian archetypal language with a fixed manner of speech, the framework of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is inevitably

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow the term *archetype* from Jungian psychology.

Christian. This orthodox framework naturally invites interpreters to view *The Rime* within a system of Christian doctrine.

But the universe of the poem is not wholly and exclusively Christian. It is also pagan and demoniacally nonsensical. These pagan elements make the poem exceptionally resistant to Christian interpretations, they create the interpretational pitfalls Robert Penn Warren calls “lags and lapses” or “meaningless marvels” (Boulger 45, 38). The problem with reading *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* within a restricted Christian economy, is that so much in the poem has to be neglected in order for the interpretation to be consistent.

It is all well and elegant to see *The Rime* as a “sacramental vision” (Boulger 21) where the actions of the poem reflect the myth of Fall and Redemption, where the shooting of the Albatross “re-enacts the Fall” (Boulger 26) and where the blessing of the water-snakes symbolizes Redemption—as Robert Penn Warren does in his influential essay *A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading*. Equally well and elegant is it to read *The Rime* as Coleridge’s personal meditation on the Christian doctrine of Atonement, as Russell M. Hillier has recently done in his essay *Coleridge’s Dilemma and the Method of “Sacred Sympathy”: Atonement as Problem and Solution in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. But neither of these essays (as would be expected from any approach to the poem from a Christian point of view) is successful in explaining an aspect of the poem’s denouement that I consider to be a key to understanding *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*—the sadness of the Wedding-Guest upon hearing the moral. If it were not for the Wedding-Guest’s melancholy, I would accept, though only barely, *The Rime* as a “sacramental vision” or even as a musing on Atonement.

The orthodox interpreter of *The Rime* that has faith in the Mariner's concluding moral and relies on it by its face value seems to blindfold himself and plug his ears with wax as *The Rime* nears its end, as he doesn't appear to register what happens to the Wedding-Guest after both the Scribe and the Mariner exit the poem. The Christian interpreter is like one who leaves the theatre right before the last act, never finding out how the play actually ends. By leaving too soon and not lingering till "the morrow morn" to find the Wedding-Guest sad, the Christian interpreter's reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* remains wanting and incomplete. In the following chapter I will therefore expand my understanding of *The Rime* by exploring that strange world in which the Wedding-Guest suddenly feels "of sense forlorn" (623).

### 3. “As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean”:

#### An Absurd Picture of *The Rime*

The absurd dimension of *The Rime* is commonly attended to with comparisons to dreams. In dreams anything is possible, even that strange “absence of surprise” (Hayter 198), as Coleridge observed in his meditations on dreams. Only in dreams can one be dead and alive at the same time and consider it normal, only in dreams can a ship move without wind and it is either only in dreams or then very dreamlike to perform actions completely unaware, like impulsively shooting an Albatross—a “perfect dream act” (Bostetter 111).

What makes the absurd so fluently translatable to the language of dreams is the lack of logical sense making, the atmosphere of indifference and the complete unpredictability. Within formal logics the *reductio ad absurdum* is “the process of reasoning that derives a contradiction from some set of assumptions, and concludes that the set as a whole is untenable, so that at least one of them is to be rejected” (Blackburn 322). In real life, and even in dreams, this kind of absurdity irritates at worst, and produces comedy at best. It is the kind of absurdity that colloquially is termed “crazy”. Within philosophical existentialism, however, the absurd is “a title for the pointless or meaningless nature of human life and action” (Blackburn 3). *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has elements of the absurd in both senses of the word. The incommensurability between the Mariner’s crime and punishment constitutes a conflict that threatens the coherence of the poem with the resulting danger of reducing it to absurdity. As existentially absurd, *The Rime* emerges through its dreamlike universe governed by randomness rather than reason, as well as the Mariner’s passive way of being in this world—a world as irrational as the one of Greek mythology.

To begin with the absurd atmosphere of the *Rime*, the dreamlike quality is essential. In order to temporarily suspend one's disbelief and make sense of the poem during the act of reading, the dreamlike milieu of *The Rime* will instruct the reader to use his experience of dreams in understanding the fantastic unfolding of the Mariner's tale. James D. Boulger refers to Lowes on this point thus:

[O]ur memories of dreams, states in which the senses and the conscious space-time restrictions inculcated by the reasoning process weaken, allowing the preconscious state of pure imagination latent in our minds to reassert itself, are the sounder guide to the prerational sense of the world of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'....The concept of Dream...as defined by Lowes as the form, logic, movement, and shaping spirit of the poem, is useful as the best analogue to the imaginative process of the poem itself. (Boulger 10-11)

Just like in dreams, we take the poem's supernatural machinery at work for granted as naturally as we expect the sun to rise in the east every morning. It is the dream state of mind that makes the reader feel acclimatized to the supernaturalism in the poem and not the enchanting invitations to the familiar "Gothic".<sup>4</sup>

Rather than drawing parallels between the Gothic and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, it is more illuminating to mirror *The Rime* with the phantasmagoria of Greek mythology, where divinities are plentiful and occupied by running nothing but dubious errands. Bostetter observes a similar chaotic society of divinities in *The Rime*, where each divinity is rather randomly allotted its role to play:

There is a hierarchy of divinities in the tale. When the Mariner blesses the snakes unaware, but through a force superior to himself ("Sure my kind saint took pity on me"), he is heard by the holy Mother who sends "the gentle sleep from Heaven" and the rain that refreshes him when he awakes. And "by the invocation of the guardian saint" the angelic spirits enter the bodies of the ship's crew. The "lonesome Spirit from the south-pole", who is certainly less a Neoplatonic daemon than a kind of

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<sup>4</sup> James D. Boulger is convincing in his insisting that "Coleridge was an erudite and serious man, not a fool writing a pot-boiler for an audience of 'Gothic' sensibility" (Boulger 14).

primitive totem force, is subservient to the angelic forces and is pressed into carrying the ship as far as the line. But he has power enough to demand and receive penance “long and heavy” for the Mariner. However we look at it, there is something arbitrary and less than merciful in the way in which the higher powers defer to the polar spirit. (Bostetter 115)

The uncanny operating of the supernatural gallery in *The Rime* establishes the mood as absurd in the unpredictable universe of the poem. The dice game played between Death and the Night-mare Life-in-Death over the lives of the Mariner and the rest of the ship’s crew is an emblem of the capricious arbitrariness surrounding the poem. It is the decisive element that “knocks out any attempts to impose a systematic philosophical system, be it necessitarian, Christian, or Platonic, upon the poem” (Bostetter 114). With the casting of dice, “The game is done!” (197) and reason is cast off board.

The Ancient Mariner is generally seen as an overtly passive character, as a character to whom things happen rather than him acting. In the unpredictable workings of the wind that make up the labyrinthine sail home (as opposed to the straight voyage out), the Mariner is completely idle. As the only living man on the ship he is miraculously brought to a bay he takes for home: “Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed / The light-house top I see? / Is this the hill? is this the kirk? / Is this my own countree?” (464-67). Yet he has been taken to his own country “Without or wave or wind” (423). Together with his “inspired” crew they simply “sailed on, / Yet never a breeze did breathe: / Slowly and smoothly went the ship, / Moved onward from beneath” (373-76). Until the “supernatural motion is retarded” again, and the men of the crew “fix their stony eyes” (436) on the Mariner anew, until the Mariner, whose curse all of a sudden “is finally expiated”, continues: “But soon there breathed a wind on me, / Nor sound nor motion made: / Its path was not upon the sea, / In ripple or in shade //...// Swiftly,

swiftly flew the ship, / Yet she sailed softly too: / Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze—  
/On me alone it blew” (452-55, 460-63). To sail the large ship would require “four times  
fifty living men” (216), yet the Mariner, stuck in a loneliness of hell, is brought home,  
unaware, as it were.

Equally unaware seems the Mariner’s shooting of the Albatross. At no point in  
his tale does he give an explanation for his murderous act. And when “A spring of love  
gushed from [his] heart” (284) and he blesses the water-snakes, he does so “unaware”.  
Everything the Ancient Mariner does is done unknowingly, even when he is invigorated  
into action by a “speck” at the horizon. Little does he know that when he bites his arm  
and sucks his blood and cries: “A sail! a sail!” (161), the windlessly approaching “sails  
that glance in the Sun, / Like restless gossameres” (183-84) is the specter-bark whose  
“specter-woman and her death-mate” of crew will decide his fate by a game of dice. In  
his abyss of estrangement from the world, the Mariner’s actions seem purposeless and  
unwittingly performed. From the vantage point of the Ancient Mariner, reality is barren  
and “unaware”—it is “As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean” (117-18).

As *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is so dreamlike, one could, keeping in mind  
that anything is possible in dreams, argue that there is no meaningful ground for  
criticizing the poem in reference to the incommensurability between the crime and the  
punishment of the Mariner. But if one is determined to approach an understanding of  
this dream it remains a question that calls for attention.

Having performed the “perfect dream act” of shooting the Albatross, the Mariner  
is condemned to Life-in-Death while the rest of the two hundred men crew is lost to  
Death. As the only living man on a ship whose movement he has no control over, he is

as lonely as lonely can be, and even though the corpses of his dead crewmates will be spirited for long enough to sail the ship home, the “ghastly crew” (340) is no good company. Upon standing on firm land again in his own country, the Mariner’s fate of telling strangers his tale begins with the Hermit, whose shriving capability is not enough to once and for all free the Mariner from his curse, and so “ever and anon throughout his future life an agony constraineth him to travel from land to land”, as in all eternity “at an uncertain hour, / That agony returns: / And till [his] ghastly tale is told, / This heart within [him] burns” (582-85).

In the deconstructive process of focusing one’s reading on the absurd disproportion of the Mariner’s punishment to his crime of shooting the Albatross, more discrepancies in the poem emerge. Raimonda Modiano, for instance, examines “some aspects of the discrepancy between the experience the Mariner is likely to have undergone and his subsequent account of it” (42), and Leah Richards-Fisher observes that the “incommensurability between cause and effect is visible in the moral of the poem as well—as the punishment is inappropriate to the crime, the moral derived by the Mariner is incompatible with his experiences” (64). Both critics stress the Mariner’s lack of understanding of his haunting experience, while bringing the Wedding-guest’s insight into the reality of that experience to the fore. For Modiano the end result for both the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest is that of alienation:

The irony of the Mariner’s fate is that, while trying to overcome the resistance of the Wedding Guest by exposing his auditor to a more imaginative way of thinking and at the same time by drawing closer to his values, the Mariner succeeds in alienating both himself and the Wedding Guest from their own respective worlds. When the Mariner delivers his closing moral, the Wedding guest is “stunned” and of sense forlorn” (622-23), a state hardly suitable for the wise lesson of love and prayer the Mariner tries to teach him. He has been initiated indeed into a universe where God “Scarce seemed...to be” (600). ( 58)



What the state of alienation in other words amounts to for both characters, is that of an absurd dead end.

Equally absurd seems the Mariner's inactive state of unawareness while the Wedding-Guest is plunged into the reality of the Mariner's experience of the absurd in Richards-Fisher:

[T]he Wedding-Guest seems to be the only active persona to realize that the message of the tale is much more than a call to love all creatures. If the purpose of the Mariner's tale were simply to encourage love and brotherhood, an auditor for his tale might awaken wiser the next day, but the Wedding-Guest's sorrow shows that he also sees what the Mariner experienced but doesn't comprehend—evidence as to the arbitrary nature of judgment, a sense of inequity in crime and divine punishment, an overwhelming sense of what it means to be truly alone, and an accompanying loss of hope. (67)

Those readings of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* that follow the Wedding-Guest to “the morrow morn” and acknowledge his transformation into a “sadder and wiser man” recognize an absurd vision as part of their conclusion. But rarely is this vision defined as absurd. More often is it euphemized as a state of “alienation”, “loss of hope” or as the result of achieving “greater knowledge, and with that knowledge comes pain” (Richards-Fisher 67).

This euphemization is perfectly in line with arriving at the absurd in the conclusion, as in the conclusion there is no space left to elaborate on the absurd. To bluntly give *The Rime* the verdict of absurd is too harsh and final—“The game is done!” as the Night-mare Life-in-Death would exclaim. In addition, to call *The Rime* absurd, without investigating what the absurd can yield, not only goes against the spirit of the poem but it also prevents an explanation of the Mariner's concluding moral.

In the following chapter I will, however, elaborate on the absurd beyond its traditional boundaries of gloominess. Rather than arriving at the absurd as a conclusion, I will take it as my starting-point.<sup>5</sup> And most importantly, I will investigate what positive possibilities the absurd as a theme can bring to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow this formulation from Albert Camus who in his preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus* asserts his opinion that previous philosophical thought has treated the absurd as a logical cul-de-sac, whereas he is taking the absurd as his starting-point: “[I]t is useful to note... that the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a starting-point” (2).

#### **4. The Albatross and the Water-Snakes:**

##### **An Epiphany of the Absurd and the Acceptance of the Same**

The vision of the absurd that the reader guided by the Wedding-Guest perceives at the end of *The Rime* upon having listened to the Mariner's tale, is a vision the Ancient Mariner experiences the moment he aims his cross-bow at the Albatross. In contrast to the Wedding-Guest, whose insight into the absurd comes after the unfolding of the Mariner's tale, the Mariner's Epiphany of the absurd comes before his subsequent experience of a capricious underworld at sea.

The enigma of why the Ancient Mariner shoots the Albatross is a question of the caliber that can easily occupy one's mind a whole life time. The act is sudden, impulsive, unpremeditated, unexplained and unpredictable. Yet one can picture the Mariner performing his act with unwavering steadfastness; one can picture him aiming his cross-bow with nothing but the intent to kill in his mind. The Mariner shoots the Albatross with an intuitive swiftness. There is no room for rational reasoning in that moment—other than rationally calculating how to aim—as his immediate apprehension of the absurd is occupying all of his mental faculties.

The question of why the Mariner kills the Albatross is a truly poetical question in that it lacks a definite answer. The shooting is as incomprehensible and unmotivated as Mr. Meursault's shooting of the Arab on the Algerian beach in *The Outsider* (1942) by Albert Camus. Even in court, in front of the judges, Mr. Meursault himself is short of words for an explanation for his unpremeditated, sudden and impulsive shooting:

“Mixing up my words a bit and realizing that I sounded ridiculous, I said quickly that it

was because of the sun” (99). In a similar situation the Ancient Mariner might have said “it was because of the ice”.

Right before the Albatross appears through the “mist and snow”, the Mariner describes the monstrous polar ice of Antarctica:

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

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

The ice was here, the ice was there,  
The ice was all around:  
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,  
Like noises in a swound!

(51-62)

After initially finding beauty in the emerald green of the ice, the Mariner is soon repulsed by its dismal inhumanity, until he is exasperated by its loud crackling and roaring sound. In this environment so unfriendly and chaotic to man, the Albatross however feels at home. Eric G. Wilson describes the Albatross as “a being of mist that merges with fog, foreign, eating unfamiliar food, flying in spirals, blurs of centripetal and centrifugal force. It simply sits in blanched moonshine, its element (63-78). No symbol of orientation, the albatross is a synecdoche for chaos. The bird as cipher for ice

threatens all the Mariner holds holy” (38). It is an intense rage the Ancient Mariner feels towards the ice, which by its massiveness imprisons him within himself. In front of the stupendous immenseness of Antarctica, the Mariner experiences the limits of being a human being. By shooting the Albatross, he cuts himself off from nature and in relation to his crew, he abandons his duty towards society.

After experiencing utter vulnerability and isolation by vast masses of ice, the Mariner despises the Albatross for its perfect independence within an environment of the Antarctic wild. The Mariner’s distaste for the Sea-bird is heightened still, by his crewmates’ attempts to domesticate it by giving it “food it ne’er had eat” (67). For “vespers nine” it comes “for food or play” (73) and during this time the ice “splits” and “A good south wind [springs] up behind” (71) which compels the crew to infer that the Albatross is a bird of superstitious powers.

I fully agree with Bostetter when he claims that the Mariner’s shooting of the Albatross is “an act of blasphemy, of defiance against superstition (against the bird as one of ‘good omen’), of rebellion against God and the Christian universe. It is therefore an act of pride, an assertion of superiority” (110). The Mariner’s rage towards the ice makes him rage towards all of God’s universe. He abhors the whole creative design by God—its allowing for freezing cold, mist and snow, and grotesque mountains of ice. In a situation where he has virtually nothing under control he rebels against God’s power over him. Out of spite he shoots the Albatross to end his crewmates’ joyous bonding with a wild creature of the air that they trust to give them good luck. The Mariner is filled with an urge to challenge even the most primitive recourse man has to reconciliation with nature; superstition.

The moment he shoots the Albatross with his cross-bow, the Ancient Mariner is stung, as if by a dagger of ice, by his blasphemous revelation of the futility of both God and superstition. In his Epiphany of the absurd he realizes that a bird is a bird, and no more. All the rest is fiction.<sup>6</sup>

But it is not without consequences that the Ancient Mariner in action realizes his Epiphany of the absurd. The Polar Spirit avenges the slain sea-bird and as he carries the ship “as far as the line”, they will cross the specter-bark where Death and Life-in-Death cast the fatal dice. While the crew abandons the Mariner by each of their death, the Mariner is sentenced to a life as eternal as death; a timeless life in which he is cursed to tell and retell strangers his tale about his perplexing experience of the supernatural realm of the sea.

The theme of eternity is very pronounced in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In his penance of eternally wandering the earth, the Ancient Mariner has often been likened to the Wandering Jew from Medieval folklore, who according to legend was cursed to wander the earth until the Second Coming for having insulted Jesus on his way to the Crucifixion(<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/635269/wandering-Jew>). In the case of the Mariner, however, there is no condition History has to fulfill in order for his wandering to end. Instead, what awaits him is eons of endlessness, where telling his tale will be the only single repetitive task to perform again and again.

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<sup>6</sup> I owe this line of thought to Coleridge’s own notes to his poem *The Raven* (1798)—which is a tale about a woodman who chops down a tree to build a ship, whose crew dies in a storm as a revenge on nature’s part as a raven and his nestlings lived in that same chopped tree. In the first pious note he adds: “We must not think so; but forget and forgive, / And what Heaven gives life to, we’ll still let it live”. In a second note to the previous one he criticizes his piousness: “Added thro’ cowardly fear of the Goody! What a Hollow, where the Heart of Faith ought to be, does it not betray? this alarm concerning Christian morality, that will not permit even a Raven to be a Raven, nor a Fox a Fox, but demands conventicular justice to be inflicted on their unchristian conduct, or at least an antidote to be annexed” (Heymans 20).

The Mariner's re-living by retelling his experience at sea epitomizes the notion of Eternal Recurrence as "the image of cycles in which the universe returns to re-enact exactly the same course of events" (Blackburn 125). A modern existentialist thinker to explore the implications of the ancient idea of the Eternal Recurrence—an idea which is shared by many religions and was an important theme in much of Classic Greek philosophy—is Friedrich Nietzsche (Blackburn 125). In a famous section called *The Greatest Weight* in his book *The Gay Science* (1887) he envisions the Eternal Recurrence thus:

What if, some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" (Nietzsche 273)

The picture emerges as classically absurd. It depicts an agonizing situation from which there is no way out. But, as Walter Kaufmann in his introduction to the English translation points out, Nietzsche's project with the Eternal Recurrence was not to paint a pessimistic picture of life. Instead, he inquires whether the doctrine could serve a positive function, as he realizes that there are times in life and perhaps even ways of life that could make this idea even attractive (Nietzsche 17). And so *The Greatest Weight* continues thus:

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine". If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how

well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (Nietzsche 273-74)

It is around this very positive function of the Eternal Recurrence that Albert Camus interprets the myth of Sisyphus.

With the following startling and disturbing statement Camus begins his essay on the Sisyphean myth:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. (3)

An individual considering suicide stands in front of an utter absurd dead end, a terminal station of lack of sense, where the meaninglessness of life is no longer bearable. At this cul-de-sac of hopelessness Camus makes a mental somersault in which the absurd is not considered an end but a starting-point. He writes: “At this point the problem is reversed. It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that *it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning*” (40, my italics). If life has no absolute or external meaning each individual has to find, each individual is then free to create his own meaning and purpose in life. When staring into a nothingness “as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean”, and no meaning of life is to be seen at the horizon, one is free to smile and simply invent a meaning, create an imaginary goal, count foamy waves in the ocean. Of course, this is all purely theoretical, and as Camus continues: “The preceding merely defines a way of thinking. *But the point is to live[!]*” (48, my italics). And that is what Sisyphus does, rather than being crushed by his absurd fate, he embraces his life and lives it.



According to the legend the “gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor” (88). Sisyphus earns his dreadful punishment for his appetite for life, his contempt for the gods and for his hatred of death, whose underworld he had briefly visited (88-89). But Sisyphus, according to Camus, surmounts his fate by scorn. When walking down the hill to fetch his rock his mind and body is free to ponder over his condition. And amidst all his misery there are also moments of joy. Camus compares Sisyphus to Sophocles’ Oedipus when he remarks: “Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well” (90).

In his never ending laborious task, Sisyphus accepts his absurd fate. Rather than giving in to the gods by collapsing in front of his rock, he endows his eternal pushing with meaning. And so Sisyphus returns to his rock just as the suicidal candidate will return to his life on the condition that he understands the possibilities the absurd can yield. In his mind, Sisyphus is free, and like Oedipus he “too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile...One must consider Sisyphus happy” (91).

Just as Sisyphus comes to terms with his absurd predicament in the underworld and still realizes that the “point is to live”, the Ancient Mariner accepts his absurd fate of ceaselessly wandering the earth in his act of blessing the water-snakes. The undeniably redemptive feature of the blessing-act marks the Mariner’s awakening to a new outlook on life. By accepting the absurd, he is redeemed from the desolation of “the rotting sea” (240). At the moment of blessing the water-snakes the Mariner

creatively finds beauty even in slimy serpents that in our Christian culture would normally be associated with wickedness. But in the absurd freedom that is the Mariner's, he is free to see beauty in the very symbol of Christian evilness, and an astounding beauty is what he sees:

Within the shadow of the ship  
I watched their rich attire:  
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled and swam; and every track  
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
And I blessed them unaware.

(277-87)

But the Mariner's subsequent feeling of lightness of being, in which he finds he can pray and the Albatross falls off his neck and plummets "Like lead into the sea" (291), doesn't last forever. Just like Sisyphus has to return to his rock, the Mariner has to return to the reality of his everlasting curse. But the Mariner now accepts his fate, for despite all its misery there is also joy:

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,  
While each to his Father bends,  
Old men, and babes, and loving friends,  
And youths and maidens gay!

(601-09)

In his acceptance of the absurd, the Ancient Mariner realizes not only that “the point is to live”, but to live it happily, embracing all the good that life has to offer, like friendship, brotherhood and love! It is from this perspective that his final lesson of love has to be interpreted.

The complexity of the Mariner’s concluding moral originates in its outright banality. It was certainly in reaction to the triviality of the moral that Mrs. Barbauld criticized *The Rime* for its want of one. Coleridge’s answer to Mrs. Barbauld is recorded in the following oft cited *Table Talk* commentary:

Mrs. Barbauld once told me that she admired the Ancient Mariner very much, but that there were two faults in it,—it was improbable, and had no moral. As for the probability, I owned that that might admit some question; but as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination. It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights’ tale of the merchant’s sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up, and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie’s son. (Boulger 53)

What Coleridge seems to be saying is that the moral is not supposed to be taken as a moral as such. Because of its banality the reader accompanies Mrs. Barbauld in experiencing the poem as lacking a moral. Yet, the lesson of love is there in clear

English, baffling readers and resisting interpretation. There is a duality to the moral that fulfils the conditions of being a paradox. While it simultaneously nullifies itself by its insipid simplicity, it is the zenith of the Ancient Mariner's wisdom that he has accumulated during his wanderings.

As for its banality the moral is genuinely absurd. It is ludicrous, pointless and out of place in relation to the Mariner's tale. This is why the Wedding-Guest rises a sadder and wiser man the "morrow morn". The Wedding-Guest, after having listened to the Mariner's tale, is not only initiated into an absurd world; with the daft moral to conclude the tale he truly internalizes the futility of life, religion, and the world as he has known it. It is, however, unfortunate for the Wedding-Guest that he doesn't realize the true import of the Mariner's moral.

The Mariner certainly understands that his concluding lesson of love is prosaically proverbial. Still, he means every word of it:

He prayeth well, who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.

(612-17)

In his acceptance of the absurd universe from which God has withdrawn, the Mariner apprehends that a moral based on love becomes all the more important. With a God no longer present to guide humanity in its actions, it is necessary for humanity to guide

itself by affirming a principle of love and respect; to love “both man and bird and beast”. In its straightforwardness the Mariner’s moral is reduced to cliché, but he looks beyond this, because what is important to the Mariner is that the message is positive. His lesson of love makes a virtue of necessity—in a world turned absurd it is perhaps the best we have recourse to.

It is certainly not in the best of all possible worlds that the Mariner meets his strangers and tells them his tale. But the world in which he, and all the rest of us lives, is a good enough world. Bostetter arrives at a similar conclusion as for the *Ancient Mariner*’s “more or less positive resolution”:

In part, the sweeping affirmation of the moral reflects the excited relief and gratitude of both Mariner and Coleridge at having reached even so partial a resolution of the Mariner’s problem as the conclusion of the poem presents. The Mariner is allowed to live and return to his own country; he is condemned (and privileged) to tell his tale; he has power and importance, a certain freedom of will and movement, a hope of salvation. He has arrived, at least, at a *modus vivendi*. (117)

Within the frame of his curse, the Ancient Mariner succeeds in carving out a way of life that has meaning for him. Of course, life could treat him better, but that’s beside the point, as “the point is to live” and make good of whatever that we have.

Of the Ancient Mariner’s concluding moral, the Scribe offers no interpretation. He just simply repeats the content of the Mariner’s words when in the margin he writes: “And to teach, by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth”. In contrast to the Wedding-Guest, who is a youth, the Scribe seems as ancient as the Mariner. By his mature age and dull conservatism, the Scribe could be thought of as representing the past or at most the very present of Coleridge’s own time. The Wedding-Guest, on the other hand, being a young man, could be thought of as

representing the future. As ignorant as we are at any one point in time about the future, as ignorant are we about the fate of the Wedding-Guest. But we know that the Wedding-Guest has lost his innocent trust in the world, and we know that he doesn't join the wedding. If the Wedding-Guest in his youth is to represent the future, his leaving the wedding to celebrate a holy sacrament seems to foreshadow the modern secularization that has become apparent in today's world.

Although almost two hundred years have passed since Coleridge completed his final version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the poem still seems relevant today. In his character of the Wedding-Guest he not only prophesies an existential condition of the absurd that wasn't diagnosed until the mid twentieth century, he also foretells the widespread flight from the ecclesiastical sphere in modern Western culture. Coleridge's vision was that of a clairvoyant's, or as Boulger puts it, in a more sober manner:

The doubts and questions Coleridge raised were not those of his own century; they were of ours. His contemporaries on the whole failed to understand his questions and were puzzled by his answers and formulations; today, though we may not be able to accept his formulations, wherever we question (in the novel, in philosophy, in aesthetic theory, in political theory), we find Coleridge has been there before us. It is his searching mind, his inquiring spirit that is an image of our own and may yet be several steps ahead. (3)

It has often been suggested that Coleridge was "afraid of his own vision" (Boulger 20), but in his hero of the *Ancient Mariner* he comes to terms with the scary abyss of the absurd. The Mariner does not shut his eyes in front of this abyss. Instead he looks straight into its eye with his own "glittering eye" and decides that it will not crush him. And so he wanders on, defying the absurd by delivering his banal lesson of love. Just like Sisyphus, we must think of the Ancient Mariner as happy.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the polytheological economy of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the manifest framework of the poem is predominantly Christian. In addition to the poem being framed by a wedding, the Scribe supplies glosses in the margin that enhance the Christian background. In his telling the Wedding-Guest his tale, the Mariner not only expresses himself in a Christian archetypal language, he furthermore translates his uncanny experiences to a rhetoric of Christian mythology in order to maintain his auditor's interest. These features of *The Rime*, that make the framework of the poem inevitably Christian, have invited many critics to view *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as forming an allegory to various doctrines of Christianity. But the orthodox readings as a rule fail to explain the Wedding-Guest's melancholy upon hearing the Mariner's tale.

To read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* from the Wedding-Guest's perspective constitutes another approach to the poem. This approach attends to the uncanny elements of the poem, in which the dreamlike quality and the affinities to Greek mythology are taken into consideration. This line of interpretation points to the absurd aspects inherent in *The Rime*, where the discrepancy between the Mariner's crime and punishment is brought to the fore, together with the Mariner's passiveness and helplessness in a universe governed by chance. Characteristic to these readings that focus on the Wedding-Guest is an acknowledgment of the absurd. But rarely, if ever, is the absurd elaborated upon, which has a stunting effect on the overall interpretation.

In my own reading of *The Rime*, I have taken the absurd as my starting-point. In the midst of the grotesque ice masses of Antarctica, where the Ancient Mariner feels threatened and consequently enraged by the Albatross's arrogant independence, he

experiences an Epiphany of the absurd and shoots the sea-bird. As punishment for his crime, he is cursed to wander the earth in all eternity telling strangers his ghastly tale of life on a ship controlled by supernatural forces. Through his act of blessing the water-snakes, the Mariner accepts the absurdity of life in which he is to meet his absurd fate. Instead of being crushed by his condition, he bears it with stoical calm. Just like Sisyphus returns to his rock that he is to push up the hill only to see it fall down again, the Ancient Mariner sets out to tell strangers his tale, always concluding it with his lesson of love.

The moral of *The Rime*, as I have shown, is paradoxical in that it is absurd in its banality, while at the same time it comprises the enlightened Mariner's sincere teaching. The young Wedding-Guest, however, only sees the absurd banality of the moral, which is why he turns his back on the wedding. In this way Coleridge seems to prophesize the process of modern secularization as part of the absurd existential condition that has only become apparent in the last fifty years.

For the Ancient Mariner, on the other hand, all is well. With each retelling of his tale and each repeating of his lesson of love, he continuously accepts the absurdity of human life. In this *modus vivendi* the Mariner is as appeased as an Ancient Sage.



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