

An Alchemical Exposition of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”¹

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Abstract

In its essence, alchemy strives to arrive at a harmonious synthesis of the contending opposites. The maxim “Dissolve and coagulate” encompasses in its precision not only Jung’s extensive alchemical deliberations but also Coleridge’s theoretical formulations on “Imagination.” A conceptual belief in life’s struggle towards unification and coherence is seen in Jung and Coleridge both as the outcome of an intense struggle of conflicting and contending mental and psychological processes in the background. The chaos of contending tendencies, followed by an analysis in isolation of these opposing forces, and a final resolution into harmony is what alchemy proceeds with. This paper is an analysis of how these opposing and conflicting tendencies, psychologically and alchemically, are resulting in a wholeness through the symbolic cluster of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”.

Keywords: Alchemy; Jung; Coleridge; “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

The archetypal pattern of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” [*Rime*] is also alchemical. Alchemy and psychology are inter-related in a mysterious manner which Haven describes in the following words while referring to Boehme’s concept of both:

Boehme could find in alchemy both a confirmation of his mystical vision and a language for it precisely because alchemy was in part a transformation of psychological facts into objective facts of nature, and therefore, made it appear that nature revealed the 'spiritual' truths which the mystic found in his own 'imaginative' experience (182).

The gold residue of alchemy is the equivalent of psychic individuation. Toor, while quoting from Jung, further glosses over the idea in these words: “The symbolic gold of great worth, or the transforming philosopher’s stone ‘lapis philosophorum’ hunted for centuries by the alchemists—is to be found in man.... It is the heart which is transmuted into the finest gold” (86). In his life-long concern with the synthesis of polarities Coleridge is, in his literary and philosophical backgrounds, indebted to numerous philosophers and mystics of antiquity. Lefebure mentions the names of Boehme and Bruno that moulded his mind towards “polar logic and dynamic philosophy”; and that the *Rime* is an endeavour in the direction of that dynamic to sort out and synthesize these

polarities of thought and feeling. The analysis of the poem has been conducted, according to Lefebure, on two levels i.e. on one level it is intellectual and spiritual (alchemy married to Christian piety), and on the other it is the psychological probing into “personality disturbances.” Jung’s theoretical and hypothetical findings about the polarity of psyche and the energy released during the process are confirmatory of Coleridge’s philosophical speculations (12-13). As an instance of the argument of polarities brought to harmony, the Mariner’s voyaging between the opposite Polar Regions and subsequent entering the malignancy of Pacific is symbolic reading of the Mariner’s psychic and moral dilemmas and their alchemical resolution. From the story of the *Rime* it appears that the Mariner, while reaching the equator, has attained a mature stage of life. His normal assessment of his circumstances is challenged by some curious unknown phenomena. Like the alchemist, he is in search of an elixir to remedy the conflicting maladies of his inner and outer worlds. This search is symbolic, a journeying through the inner world of the psyche:

The individuation process is sometimes described as a psychological journey; it can be a tortuous and slippery path, and can at times simply seem to lead around in circles.... In this journey the traveler must first meet with his shadow, and learn to live with this formidable and often terrifying aspect of himself: there is no wholeness without a recognition of the opposites (Fordham np).

In the process, while facing the archetypes, the subject may succumb to temptations and wrongfully satisfy himself with the whims of a demigod or deity—subjective denominations that have frequently manifested in the biggest tragedies of our times in the form of Napoleon, Hitler, or Mussolini:

Although everything is experienced in image form, i.e., symbolically, it is by no means a question of fictitious dangers but of very real risks upon which the fate of a whole life may depend. The chief danger is that of succumbing to the fascinating influence of the archetypes. If we do, we may come to a standstill either in a symbolic situation or in identification with an archetypal personality (Jung 1940: 90).

Archetypically, mythically, and symbolically, man is confronted by the Albatross (the Arabian phoenix, or Icelandic Vuoko)², putrefied ship, slimy sea, specter-bark with its skeletal occupants—such a psychic condition Jung calls as “the *massa confusa*, the chaos or *nigredo* [blackness]”³—all pushing him towards his centre of gravity that would provide him a partial, if not complete, vision of the Self. An Individuated Self, reaching to a certain point of perfection (the truth of wisdom), possesses the knowledge to unravel the mysteries of human life and

divine a means of their solution. Such a crusade remains timeless as he is to share with all a tale of new awareness and knowledge of unprecedented truths. The Mariner shares his tale of agony and woe at a wedding feast believing that the celebration of love and joy is eternally beset with pain, loneliness, and separation. It is within the ambit of these dualities that a self emerges encompassing everything that is human. The journey of the Mariner towards the center of his becoming into being is strenuous and strewn with painful realizations that successively un-riddle the surrounding mysteries. Paraphrasing from Jung, the transformative process proceeds in some such manner: after the shooting of the bird, the Mariner is in condition of the *massa confusa*, i.e. "the chaos or *nigredo* [blackness]." In this elemental mayhem, Mercurius (as "Nous": consciousness, man's transcendental wisdom, also called as the Old Wise Man) acts as "the *prima materia*, the transforming substance."

Then is followed the stage of illumination of the dark aspects (unconscious) through a unification of the "opposites." This means bringing together the inherent dichotomies of the psyche into wholeness. After settling down of the impurities, purity results into what alchemically is called "*albedo* (whitening)" manifested symbolically into the "sunrise" or the "full moon." This refinement of the defiled "body"⁴ through alchemical fire, results into the feminine aspect ("anima") called "sponsa (bride)", variously symbolized as silver or the moon (Jung 1977: 448). This alchemical as well as psychic action is mythologically represented in a fight with the dragon; opposites are consummated in the symbols of the moon with the sun, the silver with the gold, and the female with the male. Jung further explains the process in the following words:

The development of the *prima materia* up to the *rubedo* ...depicts the conscious realization (*illuminatio*) of an unconscious state of conflict. During this process, the scum (*terra damnata*) which cannot be improved must be thrown out. The white substance is compared to the *corpus glorificationis*, and another parallel is the *ecclesia*. The feminine character of the *lapis albus* corresponds to that of the unconscious, symbolized by the moon (Marie-Louise 256, 268).

The conscious/unconscious resolution increases the capacity of the conscious ego by breaking its barriers of narrow individuality. This process of psychic assimilation is essentially therapeutic as repressed incompatibilities are sorted out and made conscious. This is called *transference*⁵ as the repressed unconscious components are transferred or projected on the "other" who could be the listener of the story (considering the *Rime*) or the analyst in therapeutic processes in addition to so many other possibilities. This cathartic process, like that of the tragedy, relieves the experiencing subject of paranoiac and psychotic

complexities resulting from an overwhelming “shadow.” In alchemy this is accomplished by an adept woman who plays the role of the *soror mystica*⁶ (the mystical sister; see also anima). The *coniunctio* (the mixing together of different elements in the alchemist vas) produces the lapis philosophorum [philosopher's stone], the central symbol of alchemy. Jung winds up his argument by saying,

The symbolism of the lapis corresponds to the mandala (circle) symbols in dreams etc., which represent wholeness and order and therefore express the personality that has been altered by the integration of the unconscious. The alchemical opus portrays the process of individuation but in a projected form because the alchemists were unconscious of this psychic process (Jung 1968: 119).

Toor explains the alchemical process with the acronym V.I.T.R.I.O.L. whose English equivalent is “Go down into the bowels of the Earth, by Distillation you will find the Stone for the Work.” It is the purification of the base metal (the Mariner’s shadowy self) through the processes of disintegration and fusion (the Mariner’s psychic collapse shown through projections into the outer faces of nature). She relates the process to the Coleridgean concept of the secondary imagination and to Jung’s methods of the unconscious to alchemy. For Coleridge the secondary imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create”. Jung also sees a connection between the alchemical process and dreams; the dreamer when gets down into the unconscious comes across the “Ego” and “Shadow”; both these are related to the “Primal and Shadow” in alchemical language. For Jung ego is the conscious and waking part of the psyche which constructs the world according to its own level of understanding.

The dreaming part of the psyche is the Shadow which is made up of all those contents that are rejected, disowned, or denied recognition by the Ego owing to their incompatibility in the conscious world. But Jung insists upon the fact that the Shadow is compelling for the dreamer due to its compensatory quality and compensates the dreamer in his/her identity formation. All this process is like the base elements of the alchemy which later on seeks a synthesis or alchemical fusion in the dreamer’s mind (Toor 86). Following in the alchemical tradition, Lefebure analyzes the opposing tendencies of the *Rime*’s symbols followed by their progressive coagulation into harmony. According to her analyses the ocean is *prima materia*, i.e., the psychological equivalent of unconscious from where every psychological possibility can take shape. It is equated with the original chaos, and alternatively as a regenerative process of all possibilities. The Sun (Sol) rules over the skies and is the source of light and energy; exercises its influence over creation everywhere in the universe. Its influences are both divine and evil (malignant and benign; the alternative influences of the sun can be seen

in the action of the *Rime* before and after the fatal act of shooting). The moon (Luna) is feminine by mythological representation; is the counterpart and marriage partner of the sun; is changeable and multi-faceted in comparison to the sun's wisdom, incorruptibility, dependability and manliness (14-15). The initial grandeur of the sun is shown in the smooth journey of the mariners; but then its obverse can be seen in descriptions like the one below:

And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,
(Heaven's Mother send us grace!)
As if through a dungeon-grate he peered,
With broad and burning face⁷.

Though the moon is symbolic of the imaginative vastness and feminine eros, its malignant influences are equally observable in the *Rime* in the following manner:

Till clombe above the eastern bar
The hornéd Moon, with one bright star
Within the nether tip (206-8).

Both these descriptions of the sun and moon are associated with the spectre-bark whose occupants are none else but the disintegrated anima and animus. However, their final peaceful resolution is seen in the benign and soothing imagery of the moon which is an aspect of the sun as moonshine is nothing else but a reflection of the sun light. The moon, when it stays in the evil dominated sublunary region, personifies mystery or sorcery; casts her full radiance on the earth and keeps her darkest face in the background. Symbolically, the moon's relation to the sun likewise increases and decreases man's transcendental intelligibility; that reposing our trust in the knowledge of the senses (when man is in the lunar influence) decreases our apprehension of the things that lie beyond the senses. The ebb and flow of these dynamics can be seen in the narrative proceedings of the *Rime* where the sun-moon interactions are consecutively explicit. In her different stages and appearances, the moon signifies different meanings, as alchemy puts it. In this regard, Lefebure's commentary on the point can be rephrased as follows: the full moon is "divine and benevolent" but adversely dangerous and ominous in its "new or horned appearance." Again, it is associated with magic and dark magic when in eclipse; emblematically, the church associates it with death and seduction in the guise of woman. She is ambivalently different; has countless names, different guises, and myriad manifestations; "she is Ka (the bird spirit); Isis (the black one; as the elixir of life; Coleridge's use of the word *elixir* with reference to the Black Drop of opium); she is mother of all things; Mater Alchima (source of wisdom), an old woman and whore, Mary Queen (mother of the Saviour), the earth and the serpent in it,

blackness, dew and the miraculous water” (15). The following lines from the *Rime*, explicitly point to the fine symbolic shades of meaning noted by Lefebure: “The moving Moon went up the sky, /And nowhere did abide:/Softly she was going up/And a star or two beside—” (263-66). The Albatross is more than ordinary. It is the “magic bird” sharing the characteristics of Icelandic Vuoko (of the Polar Regions and mysteriously coming out of the fog) and Arabian Phoenix (probably the mystery surrounding, like the Albatross, its survival in the uninhibited deserts and sudden appearances at moments too decisive and crucial). Supporting the points of resemblances Lefebure quotes Jung in referring to the overlapping of mythological figures with the archetypes; that these eternal figures of the collective racial history of man slip into human consciousness inadvertently and spontaneously.

It is only a difference of name or symbolic, cultural representation that may create a temporary confusion of Vuoko and Phoenix, otherwise the basic archetypal pattern remains the same; what the immortal bird signifies in alchemy or mythology or psychology remains the same. An inter-relationship is now drawn among these archetypes or mythological figures to arrive at their meaning in the body structure of the narrative. Like the immortal bird spirit, the moon (Luna) is also indestructible; at the same time, she is also the sea (its tide, and salt). A complicated connection is sorted out to combine salt (Sal, sea-spume) with Luna as bird, all converging upon the gist and spirit of alchemy i.e. “the philosopher’s stone.” Salt is a volatile substance and hence spirit in alchemy; but it is also lunar i.e. bright and shining like the Albatross as a mysterious sea spirit coming out of the “shimmering white sea fog.” Though seemingly farfetched, these analogies are ingeniously bringing together, on an intelligible level, the otherwise baffling cluster of images and symbols (Lefebure 16). The friendliness of the albatross is proved from alchemical tenets and Lefebure takes pains to quote sources that refer to beliefs that certain bird spirits (phoenix, for example) are sharing in the spirit of Sol (sun) and Luna (moon). The two celestial bodies are constantly influencing and participating in human lives first benignly and afterwards malignantly, when some violation of the limits occurs. This we see in the Mariner’s journey at different stages. The case may be like that of the spirit and the body. A body with a dead spirit could be in a state of rotting, pestering and stagnation.⁸ Unless and until the base matter is infused with the philosopher’s stone (golden mean) it will not transform into gold (spiritual exhilaration). Contrary to the sailors’ accusation of the act of killing the bird, something happens that changes the mind and perception of them all. This is typical of the difference in the perception of phenomena and noumena.⁹

A popular approval can never legalize a sinful act; it is like supplementing a soulless body with unnatural concomitants; but it won’t survive for long. It

meets its natural demise in its due course of time. And so symbolically approaching the Equator, which symbolically is the most dangerous place alchemystically, the signs of internal and external abasement and debasement become visible. The sun becomes evil (sulphurous); its glory and benignity are transformed into extraordinary heat and malignancy; but this failing of perception is on part of the perceiver whose active perception has been deadened by a withdrawal from the synthesizing and transforming processes of “becoming.” He gets stuck into the static persona of “being” that can hardly accrue him the magical touch of the philosopher’s stone. The precipitating moment for the Mariner, in which conflicting oddities settle down to resolution, is a unification of thinking and feeling, of heart and head.¹⁰ This new synthesis gathers into one symbiosis of all human potentialities to negotiate with the part-whole crises. What the Mariner faces in the wake of his intellectual progress (symbolized by sun) is the inability to awaken an emotional response to a set of values and moments of existence that will not settle into the crucible of reason. He will have to bring himself to that level of the Quest¹¹ where it is a tracing back to the sources of primitive innocence and emotional freedom. These unalloyed attributes act upon man’s dry soul like the Mariner’s regenerative showers that wash down the dust from his heart (Vlasopolos 366).

Notes

¹This is a revised and altered version of my unpublished PhD work I submitted to the University of Peshawar. I completed the work under the supervision of Nasir Jamal Khattak.

² For details, see Lefebure p. 16.

³ For details, see Jung (1983) p. 232.

⁴ Called by W. B. Yeats 'the fury and mire of human veins' in the “Byzantium,” *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems*, (London, 1950), p.280.

⁵ For further details, see Samuels et al, 18-20.

⁶ For the two italicized words, see Samuels et al, 14.

⁷ *Coleridge’s Poetry & Prose*, eds. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), lines, 177-80. All subsequent references are to this edition and are parenthetically indicated in the text of this work by line numbers.

⁸ The albatross hung around the neck of the Mariner.

⁹ See Richard D. Chessick, “The Problematical Self in Kant and Kohut,”

¹⁰ On the differentiation of the two see Wilmer 158-9.

¹¹ For a complete discussion on the subject of “Quest” see Linda Forge Mellon 934-944.

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