Oneiric Reality of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": A Jungian Analysis[1]

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Abstract

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'*s somewhat awkward reception initially put Coleridge into a difficulty of how to defend its lack of logic and unintelligibility of events. As a handy solution to the problem he sub-titled the poem as 'a poet's reverie.' This topical strategy proved counterproductive. In the wake of psychoanalytic literary criticism this aspect of the poem is greatly focused upon to explore the unconscious workings of the mind as a backstage performance. Mostly judged on the bases of the ballad's dream-like atmosphere, there have been speculations on its sources of ancestry and frequent efforts have been made to justify these connections one way or the other. If placed within the atmosphere of dreams and soundly defended with arguments, the poem would serve not only to read its complicated symbolic patterns and some seemingly illogical incidents, but also establish a connection of the dream-world to our psychological dynamics as human beings. The making of connections simultaneously smoothens out disturbances in the mind by integrating new material—calming a storm—and also produces more and broader connections by weaving in new material. It does not simply consolidate memory, but interweaves and increases memory connections. In the Mariner's story, which is by and large an oneiric experience, his dream symbols reflect the condition of his inner world.

Keywords: Coleridge; "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner;" Jung; Dreams; Analytical Psychology

> In the end the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one…amongst which I include my dreams and visions. These form the prima materia of my scientific work. They are the fiery magma out of which the stone that had to be worked was crystallized.[2]

> And some in dreams assured were
> Of the spirit that plagued us so;
> Nine fathom deep he had followed us
> From the land of mist and snow (131-134).[3]

Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" [Rime] is an extraordinary tale which bears dream-like properties. Its action takes place in the human unconscious and reveals the aspects of human psyche which are common to human race. The protagonist, the Ancient Mariner [Mariner], begins his journey from the familiar and the known spheres and soon finds himself and his colleagues in the unfamiliar and the unknown—"they are the first that ever burst/Into that silent sea" (105-06). He encounters situations that are contrary to the waking experiences but legible only to an analyzing faculty capable of putting logic into an otherwise illogical entity. It is through dreams that the repressed contents of the conscious wakefulness are manifested that may help the experiencing subject in adjusting his/her psychic constitution:

> In dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal man dwelling in the darkness of primordial night. There it is still the whole, and the whole is in him, distinguishable from nature and bare from all ego-hood. Out of these all-uniting depths arises the dream, be it never so infantile, never so grotesque, never so immoral" (*Civilization in Transition* 67).

The *Rime's* classification as a dream genre has generated a psycho-literary debate of immense potential. What dreams are and how they could be helpful in reflecting upon the total expression of human personality are somewhat the central issues related to contemporary psychoanalysis. Establishing the *Rime's* "somnial" (Ford 38) generics, in the first place, will help in its psychological analysis.

Much of the ancient beliefs about dreams were oracular, prophetic, daemonic, and superstitious. Though modern approaches have considerably changed and revolutionized the ancient beliefs about dreams, they still retain a certain aura of their antiquity in religious beliefs and other psychic formations engendered by visionary experiences (Doniger and Bulkeley 69).

Gothic and weird dreams were considered as prophetically revelatory of some higher orders of truth. Though not ascertained psychologically then, beliefs in oneiric realities were strongly rooted in the Coleridgean generation of Romantics. According to Jennifer Ford the second generation of Romantics regarded Coleridge 'a good natured wizard, very fond of earth, but able to conjure his etherealities about him in the twinkling of an eye' (4). The accumulated diversity of all these theories and opinions had influenced Coleridge in varying degrees. Deeply affected by his nightmares, he searched incessantly for the causes of his traumatic dreams. His physical infirmities, psychological complexities, and, at times, prophetic beliefs were one way or

the other related to his dream world.[4] This was the reason why Coleridge took such a keen interest in dream researches and theories.

Coleridge, by temperament and circumstance, was a dreamer. In the words of Thomas De Quincy "Coleridge was a poet, a philosopher, an opium-eater, a prolific dreamer: a man whose poetry was 'shrouded in mystery—supernatural—like the "ancient mariner"—*awfully* sublime.'"[5] But his dreams are not of wish-fulfilment or fantasy-ridden; they are nightmares of haunting guilt, abandonment, and negligence. In his dreams he is confronted by the dilemma of a life other than the conscious one. Coleridge speaks of the relation between dreams and poetry in the following words:

> Poetry a rationalized dream dealing to [?about] manifold Forms our own Feelings, that never perhaps were attached by us consciously to our own personal Selves.[6]

Coleridge's share of burden in the *Lyrical Ballads* was manifestly dealing with the supernatural and gothic which temperamentally suited him. According to De Quincy the opium-eating poet-philosopher would remain in a state of mind that could conjure up the dreamy worlds of fairies and phantoms (70). Kiran Toor says that Coleridge was "a sort of Sandman, a weaver of elusive 'Day-Dreams', 'Sorts of Dreams', 'Reveries', 'Visions in Dream', and 'Fragments from the life of Dreams.' What he *might* have been was one of the earliest dream analysts" (83). Coleridge's statements, for instance, about poetry as a "rationalized dream" (CN II 2086) and a "waking dream," according to Toor, points to his being a dream theorist and expounder notwithstanding certain critics' allegations of the poet's lack of coherence in oneiric theories (85). His unusual interest in dreams was not owing to being curiosities; they had been a constant presence (and the most amazing one) in his whole life. He writes about the immensity of their influence on his faculties in the following words:

> The Horrors of my sleep and Night-Screams (so loud and so frequent as to make me almost a Nuisance in my own house) seemed to carry beyond mere Body—counterfeiting, as it were, the Tortures of Guilt, and what we are told of the Punishments of a Spiritual World.[7]

Statements like these provide an intimate relation and influence of dreams on the personal and poetic life of Coleridge. Albeit inseparable from the poet's personal life and grounded in his psychic constitution, an artist's artistic creation is treated as a model of eternals in which personal reflections of all those are seen who approach it with a sensitive receptivity. Kiran Toor points

to something very fascinating which, in her words, shows that Coleridge essentially touches on the same issue that Jung postulates almost a century later. She says:

> Jumping forward about a hundred years after Coleridge is writing to the dream theory of Carl Gustav Jung; dreams are explained as just such a dealing out: 'What is repressed, ignored or neglected by the conscious is compensated by the unconscious… and the dream gives clues, if properly read, to those functions and archetypes of the psyche pressing, at the moment, for recognition' (86).

This statement echoes Coleridge's definition of poetry as a sort of dream that deals out to us things that we have not yet attached to our conscious self. Also notable is how Jung describes this process of the union of conscious and unconscious elements that takes place in dreams in terms of the psychology of alchemy. For Jung, the dream is the gradual distillation of the contents of the soul. Toor relates the *Rime* to the alchemical process, and says:

> A similar alchemical movement takes place in Coleridge's the *Rime*, another dream poem, in which the ship is 'merrily *dropped*' as Coleridge emphasises, '*Below* the kirk, *Below* the hill, *Below* the lighthouse top.' Once again it is upon such a descent that the mariner (or the dreamer as the case may be) moves away from the established structures of the waking world to an extracted and separated state that exists below consciousness (87).

Alchemically this kind of wholeness is attained after the integration of the contents of dreams into the conscious workings of the mind.

Jung and Coleridge can be conveniently read when alchemy and poetry are juxtaposed in a bid to arrive at some specific meaning of the process of 'transmutation' through dreams. In the alchemical context of dreams Kiran Toor views both the psychologist and the poet as struggling to arrive at an alchemical assimilative meaning of dreams in their respective manner (90). Jennifer Ford relates the kinship of dreams with momentous creativities in these words:

> To dream is to retreat within and to enter the mind's space, a space which also belongs to a world of magic, of poetry, of visions, of sexual fantasy, the 'Stuff of Sleep and Dreams' (43).

Dreams and poetry are intrinsic to each other[8]. The creative poetic faculty is imagination which is actively operative not only during the poetic composition but also during the states of dreaming (No 2086). In varying degrees, the dreaming imagination works in a similar manner as that of the

poetic imagination. Images of the dreamscape or the "dramatis personae" alternate in different formations and depend upon the nature of modal conceptions "translated" (No 1649) into dream experience—whether static or fluid. The bulging eyes and parching tongues of the mariners, in a "scorching sun" and "copper sky," are somatically indicative of a dreaming imagination stuck in a morbid irresolution. Bodkin comments on the transformative process in the following words and says:

> In the older, unwitting fashion the images of our dreams seem to combine aspects which, when our waking thought divides them, startle us as imaginative and poetic; similarly, as we read the straightforward language of Coleridge's ballad, it is the contrast of our waking thought, running alongside our dream-like acceptance of the tale, that gives us the sense of it as a thing of poetic witchery, made to minister to some imaginative need (36).

In Boulger's opinion relaxing of the mind into an unrestricted mood of "pre-rational" sensations affords opportunities that are either dream-like, fantasy ridden, or imaginatively synthesizing. In his opinion it is this world of "pure imagination" that hallows around the atmosphere of *Rime*; that it is a world that fits into its own logic. Questioning its standards of punishment and rewards would not satisfy the confusion of an empirical mind; its logic becomes only understandable when the logician of facts and figures within us meets his final demise.

Highlighting the greater than ordinary imaginative (dream-like) character of the *Rime*, Stockholder describes it as "a dream within a dream" meaning that the highly charged atmosphere of the poem is already drowsy in which the experiencing reader further moves toward haziness in seeing him/herself as replacing a character that fits into the identification process (32). Lowes views the *Rime* in an atmosphere of dreaminess forcefully exerting its magic on the reader from the trivial act to the immense consequences.[9] His preference, according to Bostetter, to view the poem within the matrix of a dream or fairy-tale is based on his contention that the poem's overt moralizing at the end is difficult to accommodate within the secular realm of the modern mind. Furthermore, the Mariner's unusual experiences are somewhat beyond the work-a-day atmosphere of ordinary happenings to the extent that he does not go into the debate that dreams could reveal something relevant to waking life of the dreamer but only relates them to the inconsequence of the poem (71-2).

According to James D. Boulger the poem's dream quality is in the tradition of its classical prototypes which, according to him, is an essential formality of the epic structure. The epic action mostly comprises events that go beyond the normal extent of ordinary happenings; consequently the dream-frame is exploited to give the semblance of familiarity to things that may not be ordinarily believable. Since most of the action in the poem is mental and psychological, the dream strategy renders it acceptable to the common denomination of the reader (8, 9). Not fully explainable, certain happenings of the poem incite the element of curiosity in the reader. This in turn brings to the level of consciousness all those imaginative perceptions that lie dormant in the unconscious. Images and symbols coalesce in different patterns to emerge in those grand shapes and structures that are the eternal concomitants of human psyche.

Toor refers to Coleridge's famous definition of poetry as a "rationalized dream" and proceeds to link together in one relation of analytical psychology the unconscious, conscious, alchemy, and dreams. She enunciates the alchemical process that eventuates into the philosopher's stone and significantly mentions two words of the process, i.e. Primal and Shadow, that are crucially important for Coleridge's constituent parts of imagination and Jung's explanation of the dream process (Toor 88-89). Initially the "shadow" appears extremely abominable to the dreamer as it really is the 'ugliest' side of the psyche; but afterwards it becomes appealing to him as it compensates his total psyche. Similarly in alchemy it is the base element, like shadow, that is transformed into pure gold. The reconciliation is made within the mind of the dreamer.

The *Rime* is without its value and meaning a dream poem or 'reverie.' The poem's somewhat awkward reception initially put Coleridge into a difficulty of how to defend its lack of logic and unintelligibility of events. As a handy solution to the problem he sub-titled the poem as 'a poet's reverie.'[10] But this topical strategy proved counterproductive. In the wake of psychoanalytic literary criticism this aspect of the poem is greatly focused upon to explore the unconscious workings of the mind as a backstage performance. Mostly judged on the bases of the ballad's dream-like atmosphere, there have been speculations on its sources of ancestry and frequent efforts have been made to justify these connections one way or the other. If placed within the atmosphere of dreams and soundly defended with arguments, the poem would serve not only to read its complicated symbolic patterns and some seemingly illogical incidents, but also establish a connection of the dream-world to our

psychological dynamics as human beings. The making of connections simultaneously smoothens out disturbances in the mind by integrating new material—calming a storm—and also produces more and broader connections by weaving in new material. It does not simply consolidate memory, but interweaves and increases memory connections.[11] In the Mariner's story, which is by and large an oneiric experience (Nitchie 874), his dream symbols reflect the condition of his inner world:

> Day after day, day after day,
> We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
> As idle as a painted ship
> Upon a painted ocean (115-18).

Poems like the *Rime* are "mysterious" and "nightmarish" in nature. Shrouded in gothic imagery and atmosphere, their surface incoherence and lack of rational causality are perplexing for those who evaluate them in the parameters of *a priori* syndromes.[12] But these are generically dream-poems that subscribe to a peculiar world of logic deeply rooted in the human unconscious. Though not intelligible to the subject experiencing the dreams and requiring psychological insight for deciphering their meaning, Tekinay describes their symbolism in the psychological jargons of the tip and bottom of the "iceberg" (185).

Though 'involuntary and spontaneous psychic products' (Fordham np), dreams are not, so to speak, merely the phantom worlds of meaningless shadows. Their steady recurrence, either in sleep or in waking states, amounts to the mystery lying behind their crucial indispensability in the total makeup of the mind (psyche). Mostly believed to be originating from the unconscious,[13] human dreams are as old as the unconscious which according to Jung is a psychic storehouse of millions of years of personal and collective memories (*Psyche* 75). The unlimited excavation of materials from unlimited sources would lead to the same conclusion that dreams were born with the birth of the first man on earth. But we cannot jump to conclusions without some handy logic and for this purpose some evidential arguments are given to establish a relational linkage between the *Rime* and dreams. Since dreams play an important role in the process of individuation, the emphasis here is to relate the *Rime* to its vibrant aspect as a dream poem. According to Richard Haven, ultimate reality about phenomena cannot be derived solely from physical facts understood and analyzed with ordinary perceptions. A transcendental consciousness is needed to understand the accompanying mystery. He says:

> If the Mariner's experience was a "dream of truth," however, if the visionary experience of phenomena as the changing forms of a universal radiance is cognitively valid, then finite phenomena cannot be adequately described solely in terms of an order in time and space. Such a description could define phenomena as they exist in a discursive order but not as they dissolve in the unity of transcendence. If the relation between finite concept and infinite consciousness is the archetype, then an analogous relation should be revealed in physical nature (133).

Manifest contents of dreams are as much crucial to their total meanings as the latent ones. Early childhood experiences (latent infantile contents) keep interacting with experiences of adulthood. As an instance, the Mariner's killing of the albatross (when the latter is symbolically taken as the mother imago in the siblings' rivalry) is an unconscious act of killing the mother or the brother on part of Coleridge (Fruman 262-63). Mostly symbolical, disjointed, and unintelligible the Mariner himself is unable to apprehend the contents of his story while narrating them. His symbolic renderings are like pointing to the tips of the icebergs whose bottoms lie deep in the mysteries accessible only through a combination of intuition and rational thought. Kiran Toor, squarely points to Coleridge's personages of dream poems as acting out their roles in the backstage of the reader's mind (86-7). The Mariner's journey into the unknown seas is seen in similar diametric of diurnus/nocturnus and conscious/unconscious. The journey undertaken is from the familiar known world into the unknown and unfamiliar as if from the 'hypnagogic' to the 'hypnopompic.'[14]

The poet's vocation of weaving imaginative dreams through poetry is what Bodkin calls the now rare quality of intuition; the sequence of "poetry-dream-intuition" in the *Rime* runs counter to the disruptive waking thoughts (36). This see-saw movement of the two realms of experience has been magnificently debated by Leslie Brisman in Gloss-poetry alternation of the *Rime*. Thought (Gloss as the Porlockian intruder) disrupts the dream sequence and imaginative beauty of poetry and as such the *Rime* experienced as dream or intuition would yield more meaning and emotional significance than intellectual warbling (37).

In the final analysis it must be acknowledged that dreams are not casual happenings in the life of an individual; they are decisive factors and play decisive roles in the total makeup of the psyche. Their contents are revelatory

and as such reveal substantial truths--truths that are perennial to human life but remain dormant due to the ego's single-dimensional orientation in consciousness. The *Rime* as such is no exception to the rules.

Notes

[1]This 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 Prof Nasir Jamal Khattak.

[2]C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Collins and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 4.

[3]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," *Coleridge's Poetry & Prose*, eds. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004). All subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated in this paper by page number (prose) and line numbers (poetry).

[4]Ford cites Coleridge's somnial pre-cognition of his father's death a sufficient proof of the prophetic potentials of certain dreams. She further enumerates Bard Bracy's dream in *Christabel* as prophetic, foreboding a great tragedy befalling the peaceful household of Sir Leoline. Her observation that the dream is differently interpreted by the bard & Leoline is a flaw usually associated with dreams, ". . . but that the dream is a warning, a prophecy sent from somewhere, goes unquestioned" (138).

[5]H. A. Eaton, *A Diary of Thomas De Quincy, 1803*, ed. H. A. Eaton (London: Noel Douglas), entry for Wednesday 1 June 1803.

[6]See *The Notebooks of S. T. Coleridge*, Vols I & II, ed. Cathleen Coburn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), notebook No. 2086. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated by the letters, "No" followed by the entry in the notebook.

[7]Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: 1826-1834* (London: Clarendon Press, 2000), Letters No. 1020-21.

[8]Coleridge says, "puts the relation in these words:

How often the pen becomes the tongue of a systematic dream,-a somniloquist! . . . During this state of continuous, not single-mindedness, but one-side-mindedness, writing is manual somnambulism . . . (Shedd, V, 255).

[9]Lowes argues in the following words:

Springing from the fall of a feather, it becomes a dome in air, built with music, yet with shadows of supporting arch and pillar floating midway in the wave. For its world is, in essence, the world of dream. Its inconsequence

is the dream irrelevance, and by a miracle of art we are possessed, as we read, with that sense of an intimate logic, consecutive and irresistible and more real than reality which is the dream's supreme illusion….The event in a dream do not produce each other, but they *seem* to. And that is the sole requirement of the action of the poem (303).

[10]L. R. Kennard comments on the point as under:

Two circumstances are well known: the poem originated, according to Wordsworth, in a dream of Coleridge's friend John Cruikshank, and when the poem was published in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge changed the title from "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere: In Seven Parts" to "The Ancient Mariner: A Poet's Reverie." Quite plausibly, J. L. Lowes suggested in *The Road to Xanadu* (280) that the alteration was a defensive move on Coleridge's part, a retreat from full authorial responsibility in the face of Wordsworth's criticism of the poem in the preface to the same edition.

[11]As a supporting argument Fordham quotes from Jung in these words:

A dream, he says, should 'be regarded with due seriousness as an actuality that has to be fitted into the conscious attitude as a co-determining factor', and his experience has shown him that 'if we meditate on a dream sufficiently long and thoroughly, if we carry it around with us and turn it over and over, something almost always comes of it' (np).

[12]For Jung dreams are non-volitional, spontaneously emerging from the unconscious; they are manifested at a crucial point when the conscious mind overrides the spontaneous workings of the unconscious for too long. They intimate the experiencing subject with those truths that are unalloyed and correspond to the basic truth of human nature (*Civilization in Transition*,26).

[13]According to June Singer:

More important than the cognitive understanding of dreams is the act of experiencing the dream material and taking this material seriously. Jung encourages us to befriend our dreams and to treat them not as isolated events but as communications from the unconscious. This process creates a dialogue between conscious and unconscious and is an important step in the integration of the two (*Opposites Within,* 283).

[14]The words respectively mean "Before sleep, relating to the state just before falling asleep; & relating to the state immediately preceding waking up (Cardinale, "*Noises in a Swound!"* Coleridge Bulletin, New Series 17, Summer 2001, pp 27-38).

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