Coleridge's Albatross: The Wider Contexts of Relevance[1]

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the symbolic significance of the Mariner's brutal act of killing the unsuspecting innocent Albatross for reasons and motives that are even unknown to the former and relate this significant episode to issues that are individual and collective prevailing over the whole spectrum of life. This argument will also bring into spotlight the Albatross symbol that has been variously interpreted, with diverse dimensions, over the years. The main purpose is to shed light on the individual-social paradigm in the heavily loaded atmosphere of the ballad poem.

Keywords: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; Albatross & its Killing

With my cross-bow
I shot the Albatross.[2]

The rampant human tragedies of the world are more or less the same like those of the Mariner-Albatross paradigm. Unmindful of the rights and privileges of others around us (the albatrosses in their respective harmlessness) we, like the Mariner, transfix them down under pretext too clumsy for logic. Looking at the matter macrocosmically and microcosmically the picture becomes comprehensible when one comes out of one's self, stands impartial and sees the "other" in his/her own situation; and also, when one comes out of his/her geographical set-up and judges others from the standpoint of his/her situations. To be more specific it is a journey around the inner and outer worlds with the quest to search for the right solutions of our individual and collective identities; to be progressive extensions of each other keeping at the same time our individual identities intact.

The unlimited symbolic possibilities of the albatross testify not only to the richness of the symbol but the flexibility of its contextual variety. As Lowes puts it, "A poet's words mean more at times than the poet knew they meant" (153). It would,

therefore, be naive to dwell upon the "minusculity" of the act in comparison to its repercussions.

The motiveless killing of the albatross[3] has been considered as an innate depravity of man originating from Original Sin which, by and large, is related to the Fall of Adam. But according to Stuart for Coleridge the Fall of Adam was "secondary, posterior" and "phenomenal" to a spiritual Fall that was "noumenal." This "pre-Adamatic" sin is the Original Sin perennially present in human nature. The eternal recurrence of evil in acts that seem spontaneous and unmotivated is the archetypal slipping into consciousness of the evil that sets in action the whole being of man. J. A. Stuart contends as follows:

> Coleridge suggests, then, through the Mariner's shooting of the Albatross, that the latent evil in man's will may unexpectedly erupt in wanton acts which have no rational or conscious motive…for the poem makes clear that it releases an evil dynamism which the Mariner is powerless to control or bring to a halt (183).

Inadvertently the albatross is killed; the liberation and intuition associated with the bird is rejected in favour of the social applause represented by the Mariner's judgmental comrades. The Mariner tragically misses this opportunity of imaginative expansion and relies instead on the judgmental opinions of his mariners:

> Then all averred, I had killed the bird
> That brought the fog and mist.
> 'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,
> That bring the fog and mist (99-102).

The horrible sequence of afflictions occasioned by the Mariner's own doings and that are consequent upon killing the albatross, could be ridiculous in the literal sense. But metaphorically the bird symbol could be deeply rooted in those realistic values that are the corner-stones of man's moral and psychic characters. As such Chris Rubinstein sees the Mariner as a White European previously engaged in the slave trade with the infliction of unprecedented atrocities on the slaves and now is a guilty-stricken soul suffering at the hands of his memories. Symbolically the Mariner's confessions and struggle towards redemption are seen as that of the White Man now standing in utter spiritual destitution.[4]

In Harding's view the killing act is symbolically the rejection of a social offering that was harmless, and associative; it could have proved a better companion had it been given the chance to operate in the total scheme of things. The Mariner's

lack of apprehensiveness in measuring the significance of an apparently ordinary "part" of the "whole" incites him on an arrogant rejection that to his mind is an ordinary act of his justifiable supremacy (56). This creates a moral and psychic vacuum that widens day in and day out for it is the first act in a direction that is difficult to take. The rest is but a usual routine of normalcy. An aggression of the kind can initiate a horrendous legacy of mishaps as it is a small moment in the life of an individual or a nation that starts a big movement.

Quoting P. Stallknecht, Elizabeth Nitchie concurs on the point that the shooting of the albatross is the replacement of "feeling" by "reason" resulting in spiritual dreariness and dryness.[5] To bring back the lost soul to its original source of fertility, a loving disposition is to be regenerated to encompass the whole of creation into wholeness. Only then the final moral of the poem ("He prayeth best, who loveth best.") will acclimatize its worth and value (867,870,872).

In the words of Kabitoglou shooting the Albatross, symbolically, is the transformation of an imaginative, mythical vastness into the limitation of perceptive, physical definition; it is somewhat the replacing of shrouding mysteries with causal dynamics; it is the testing of the "untestables" into the crucible of physical viability. Establishing an exclusively individual identity introduces the rhetoric of subduing or eliminating the "other"; Man distances himself from himself and consequently an ideal equilibrium is lost (209):

> Alone, alone, all, all alone,
> Alone on a wide wide sea!
> And never a saint took pity on
> My soul in agony (232-235).

The killing of the albatross may also mean man's unconscious suppression of the inner voice which is necessitated by the desire for social acceptability. Jung talks in these words: "Blind acceptance never leads to a solution; at best it leads only to a standstill and is paid for heavily in the next generation" (*Memoirs* 215). With Henderson, the bird is a symbol of transcendence, of intuition, of release and liberation (*Man and His Symbols* pp. 147, 156). In the Mariner's case the bird may also symbolize the motherly Eros (Harding 73) in whose regressive attachment he feels the blissfulness of freedom from the demands of his ego. The intuition and liberation associated with the bird could have been positively assimilated into the total scheme of things had there been a conscious realization of their worth and value. Fruman puts the commission of such a crime into an imaginative universal experience that subsequently recurs in shame and remorse (411): "And I had done a hellish thing/And it would work 'em woe" (91-92).

The Mariner's action and its consequences have symbolic universal implications in individual as well as collective spheres. Man's lust for absolute power has deprived him of his sense of belonging with the "other". This, his absolutism, destroys nations and civilizations if ways are not mended timely. A coursing back into those realms of the 'self' where the wide gulfs between man and man, and man and nature need bridging must be undertaken to rescue to safety and security the whole race of mankind. To achieve this synthesis a pluralistic concept is needed to approach the whole of humanity pervasively, without any inferior motive of expediency. Exploiting the weaknesses of the weaker has become the order of the day and this new set of ethics is gaining currency in every contemporary set up. The need is to open up the horizons of our self-beleaguered Ego (bargained by compromises) and with solemn sympathy recreate a wholesome human community (Haven 33-34).

Stockholder highlights the Mariner's killing act as shutting our eyes to those realities that are ours no matter how much we try to absolve ourselves from them. Human societies survive only when individuals honestly contribute to the collective well-being; ignoring one's timely responsibilities is like destroying the social harmony which in turn is the symbolic death of its spirit (37). It is not unusual in our contemporary times that infanticidal crimes are committed in desperation when strong determinations degenerate into cowardly lethargy; when people start judging actions and intentions in the scales of personal gains and losses. The most difficult thing in life is the realization and acceptance of one's duties to oneself and to all those around that are part of the bigger whole. The Mariner's act can be interpreted as a paternal shirking away from those momentous responsibilities that establish the foundations of a family and a nation. An over-calculated approach to the unforeseeable future deprives man of faith and confidence in life.

The gist of Vlasopolos's argument focuses around the thoughtless violation of others' freedom under the misguided impression that the "other" is a fragile commodity that can be easily possessed and subdued (how much of gender disequilibrium and disparity we read here). This kind of over assertion of one's imagined potentials is reflected, at a larger scale, in the social and international power politics that has pushed the world to the brink of an almost moral bankruptcy. The tragic reality about our contemporary situation is that we are consuming all our energies in those lawless expansions that are devastating to the existence of human species even beyond this earthly habitat; while pathetically we are shrinking into concepts of cosmopolitan sympathies that are more than ever practically needed (367).

Reading the Cain-Abel analogy in the Albatross tragedy, Modiano sees a fracture at the very heart of things. It is as if one part of man is slaughtering its other less protected and vulnerable part (208). Here again is Coleridge's argument of *lectures 1795* helpful in understanding the gist of individual and collective revolutions. An inner instinct to kill and destroy in revenge is shown in historical events like those of the French Revolution about which Coleridge says in these words:

> Unillumined by Philosophy and stimulated to a lust of Revenge by aggravated wrongs, they (*dough-baked Patriots*) would make the Alter of Freedom stream with blood, while the grass grew in the desolated Halls of Justice (A Moral and Political Lecture 1795).[6]

For Empson it is the "neurotic guilt" associated with the slaughtering of the Albatross that makes the Mariner a sensitive being carrying forever the burden of his guilt (160). In Ebbatson's reading the Mariner's punishment is a befitting one as his crime is symbolically a transgression "against the indigenous peoples of the globe" meaning the slave trade by the Europeans (205). In other words, it is the realization of the "other" within that brings into active consciousness the "other" without. Though it seems difficult if not impossible at moments to be completely impartial in the judgment and evaluation of personal character in relation to others, the decisive step could be enlightening in expanding the relational context of the "self" and the "other." The lurking mistrust remains the main impediment in our approach to understand each other in a friendly atmosphere. This, we think, has created the biggest vacuum in understanding each other in the familial, communal, social, national, and international spheres.

A belief in absolutes is the dilemma of those who have been brainwashed with the ideas that the "other" who calls in question or is skeptical of a long established value in religion or faith is the greatest infidel. The persecutions inflicted upon these so-called infidels or dissenters are justified on different grounds and the collective judgmental convenience of others (as is the case with the Mariner and his peers) binds it with the sanctity of a covenant. Hawthorn's *The Scarlet Letter* somewhat relates a similar story of woe and agony in which the confused social and religious milieu rules the roost. Through collective irrationality an innocent human being is subjected to paralyzing privation without looking into the reality of the allegation.

The Mariner's act of killing the bird is a perceptive crime in which a different orientation takes place. Things are not accepted in their own validity and right of existence but manipulated under disguises ignoble by any standard of decency. This is how the corrupting agency of mind maneuvers right things for the wrong

reasons; the fault with perceptive misapprehension is largely conditioned by the projective faculty of the mind. Seeing the external realities of the world in a one-sided polarized ego-reflection may not give a true picture of that reality as it is tainted by that one-sidedness no matter how much justification could be produced in its favour. Heir to this legacy of confused standards of evaluative perceptions, modern man is caught in the turbulent vortex of his own "undoings." Seen in the vaster contexts of nations, communities, cultures, ideologies, politics, religions, dogmas, and countless other domains, this individualistic vision of self-assertion and utter disregard for others' rights of self-respect and self-esteem have created an atmosphere of unprecedented terror and misgivings in which, like the Mariner and the Albatross, both the aggressor and the aggressed are horror-stricken.

Walking victorious, like a Tsar or Fuhrer, over the dead bodies of brethren humans may satisfy the deadly whims of the perpetrator, but an ultimate facing up of the conscience exacts the most terrible taxing. Bemused with the progress of his (ours as well) journey, the Mariner is led to the temptation of an inflated supremacy in juxtaposition to the hierarchy of lower creation. It is the first temptation that leads on further into the unending series of sinful commissions. Each step is a distancing away from the associative selflessness into isolated selfishness. This creates a destabilizing polarity in the otherwise calm ambivalence of opposites maintained in a miraculous golden mean (Woodring 379).

Instead of due recognition of others' right to life and its opportunities an oppressive, subversive culture is instituted for self-assertion. For Kabitoglou the ruthlessness of such a culture can be seen in its faith in a power play of eliminating the "other" as contender rather than coexisting in a positive, constructive, competitive atmosphere. Destroying the bird in an act of unreasonable violence is equivalent to destroying the natural instinctive faculties that, as intuitions, come to the rescue of man caught in the cross purposes of his worldliness (209-10).

The Mariner's crime is an act of deadly assertion in which the flowing moments of life are squeezed to the narrow channels of self-preservation and safety within a social or religious or cultural set-up. Such a tragic failure of apprehension has turned an otherwise beautiful world into infernal fires. In the rampage towards higher securities, indiscriminate atrocities are inflicted upon those that are wrongfully implicated as threats to the so-called peace syndromes.

What makes life beautiful and bearable is its quality of flexibility in crises of understanding and accommodating all those factors that defy ordinary perceptions. In moments of utter desperation, when surrounded by snow and fog,

the only rescue for the Mariner and his sailors is the albatross[7] that is subsequently obliterated through inflated supremacy although it could have been understood and accommodated in its own right and privilege. This act of brutality can be seen into the paradigm of creating a powerful persona that elicits from the weaker a gesture of recognition in the spree of suppression and repression. The heart's inability to expand and quicken in acts of love and sympathy leads to the sorry states of our present human conditions. Unconsciously we remain stuck and fixed in the vicious web of our personal interests and allow no room for others to enjoy their fair share of opportunities.

Our reading of the poem sufficiently supports our conviction that day in and day out we indiscriminately kill our Albatrosses: in religious fanaticism; in political dissention; in racial excommunication; and in countless other notorious self-fabrications as pretexts for slaughtering and plundering. The innocence within us, like the associative, innocent albatross, tries to fly free from the wrathful fires of our vengeance and glide leisurely in the boundless gales of all time cosmopolitanism. But we won't let it escape in the name of our so-called flimsy and shaky "pride" and "schisms."[8] In an urge and desire for self-assertion, we, like the Mariner, surrender our souls to the negative forces,[9] which are utterly inhuman. In our desperate hours of isolation and alienation we listen to our own voices of agony in a "self-created inferno or celebrate our self-created heavens" (Khattak 15). Our redemption and release are at hand only when we begin striving for a change of heart; when we subject ourselves to ruthless self-analysis; when we begin to enlarge our humanity only in the name of humanity; and above all to broaden and open up our vision to see a more beautiful world transformed and re-created. We become better human beings when we become conscious of our iniquities.

Today as ever we read the *Rime* with renewed enthusiasm and each time we find new meanings and significance in the poem's narrative. We see our lives meaningfully explained as the story is richly symbolic and we follow its symbolic significance. We have become careful not only of our "Albatross" but of all those who surround us and caressingly love them as we love our own.

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 Nasir Jamal Khattak.

[2]*Coleridge's Poetry & Prose*, eds. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), lines, 81-82. All subsequent references are to this edition and are parenthetically indicated in the text of this work by line numbers.

[3]For a detailed discussion on the topic see Robert Penn Warren, *A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading, Selected Essays* (New York, 1958).

[4]See Chris Rubinstein, "A New Identity for the Mariner? A Further Exploration of 'The Rime of "The Ancyent Marinere,"'*The Coleridge Bulletin* No 3, Winter 1990, pp 16-29.

[5]All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon (111-114).

[6]Halmi et al. P.243

[7]At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name (63-66).

[8]Jung is more emphatic on the issue: The current "isms" are the most serious threat in this respect, because they are nothing but dangerous identifications of the subjective with the collective consciousness. Such an identity infallibly produces a mass psyche with its irresistible urge to catastrophe. Subjective consciousness must, in order to escape this doom, avoid identification with collective consciousness by recognizing its shadow as well as the existence and the importance of the archetypes. The latter are an effective defence against the brute force of collective consciousness and the mass psyche that goes with it (*On the Nature of the Psyche* p. 131).

[9]We always see the "Other" as the embodiment of all evils, no matter how much harmless and innocent the "Other" may be; our negative projections never let us see a beautiful world out there.

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