

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE'S "THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER" AND "CHRISTABEL": DOUBTS ABOUT THE UNIVERSAL ORDER

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Abstract: There is a dark strain which can be traced in the poetry of all the major nineteenth century English romantic poets: a scepticism about the ultimate purpose of man's life, a sense of having lost a metaphysical certainty and faith in the presence of a benevolent power who maintains harmony and order in the universe. Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one of them. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel", he reveals a nightmarish vision of the universe where moral order seems to be replaced by a cosmic "hap".

Keywords: *romantic, poetry, Coleridge, gothic, scepticism*

Özet: On dokuzuncu yüzyıl İngiliz romantik şairlerinin yapıtlarında karanlık, kuşkuların, umutsuzluğun ve güvensizliğin egemen olduğu bir yön vardır. Samuel Taylor Coleridge de bu çalışmada ele alınan şiirlerinde evrenin düzenini sağlayan metafizik bir gücün varlığı konusundaki kuşkularını dile getirmektedir. Coleridge'in karabasan dünyasında güven duyulabilecek bir evrensel ve ahlaki düzen yerine tesadüflerin hakim olduğu bir düzensizlik hüküm sürmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *romantik, şiir, Coleridge, gotik, kuşkuculuk*

Coleridge's doubts about the universal order and his fears regarding the cosmic "hap" are revealed impressively in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel". In these poems, Coleridge used the gothic as the medium in which to discuss things, which he felt, did not bear the light of day. As "light" often implies clarity and simplicity, "dark" in its turn implies complexity and unknowability. Coleridge's deep-set anxiety and fears found poetic expression in the gothic.

Among the romantic poets, it is Coleridge who should be credited for fully transcending from the ordinary world of conscious experience to the gothic, which stands for the world of the unconscious. At the basis of Coleridge's poetry is his conception of the romantic sublime. Coleridge was influenced by the theories of German romanticists like Kant and Schiller for whom the sublime marks the stage of consciousness when one becomes aware of a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense. Clearly, Coleridge and Keats are the English representatives of the German sublime which claims the supremacy of the mind over nature. However, Coleridge does not abandon nature as Kant and Schiller do : "he remains temperamentally rooted in the external world while at the same time practicing idealism in an even more refined and in some aspects more radical form than his German peers" (Modiano, 1985: 100).

Wordsworth, too, believed that the boundaries of the phenomenal world can be transcended but only in the effort to discover a divine power behind it. Wordsworth starts with nature and ends with nature. Sensing the divine presence within - or behind - the natural world, he stops at that point. Coleridge, on the other hand, attempts to transcend this world by establishing an alternative world which nonetheless takes its roots from the objective, phenomenal world. This second world is a purely subjective one ; constructed within the mind or psyche of its creator, it inevitably owes a debt to the peculiar subconscious of the poet. This is the fundamental reason why Coleridge's supernatural poems, namely the triad of "Kubla Khan", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and "Christabel" have been so popular with psychoanalytic critics.

It is nowadays a commonplace - after Freud and Jung- that dreams, however irrational they may seem, have a deep-rooted connection with human psychology. An entire branch in the field of psychology concerns itself with the systematization and interpretation of dreams. The premise is that no dream is meaningless and that each has its own peculiar psychological validity which may not be easily recognized by the persons experiencing the dreams themselves, the reason being that the bottom of the "iceberg" in each individual is completely dark and unknowable. Only through psychoanalysis can it be -partially - brought to light. So, it is quite possible to find a "femme-fatale" behind a "Victorian" lady or a vagabond soul behind a man of strict discipline.

As we know, Coleridge's "mystery" poems are all based on dreams. While "Kubla Khan" is the poem of an attractive phantom-world, both "Christabel" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are nightmare poems. In fact, the subtitle that Coleridge assigned to the latter poem in 1800 was "A Poet's Reverie". For Coleridge, "reverie" meant "a waking dream" in which the mind, though remaining aware, relaxed its

monitoring and allowed the imagination to roam freely in a streamy process of association. It may also be the case that by presenting these dark poems as dreams, Coleridge was not only exploring his own psyche or human psyche in general but also protecting himself against probable charges of contradiction. Being an optimistic theoretician and a man of strong religious faith by his own account, his prose writings could have been evaluated as irreconcilable with his poetic practice. But if they are dream-products, the values and the order inherent in them could be allowed to run counter to the poet's conscious utterings.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is perhaps Coleridge's most celebrated nightmare. Many critics feel at ease with the traditional readings of the poem and their comforting morals. Robert Penn Warren's essay on the poem, first published in 1946, has been very influential on critics, the majority of whom are content to accept his interpretation of the primary theme of the poem as "sacramental vision" (Warren, 1958: 78).

As Warren interprets it, the poem dramatizes fundamentally Christian sentiments of sin, punishment, repentance, and redemption:

The mariner shoots the bird; suffers various pains, the greatest of which is loneliness and spiritual anguish; upon recognizing the beauty of the foul sea snakes, experiences a gush of love for them and is able to pray; is returned miraculously to his home port, where he discovers the joy of human communion in God; and utters the moral, "He prayeth best who loveth best, etc." We arrive at the notion of a universal charity ... the sense of the "One life" in which all creation participates and which Coleridge perhaps derived from his neo-Platonic studies and which he had already celebrated, and was to celebrate, in other and more discursive poems.

(Warren, 1958: 78)

Going along the same lines, many critics interpret the poem as a myth of the guilty soul marking in clear stages the passage from crime and punishment to such redemption as is possible in this world. Sometimes it is interpreted as a desire to describe a spiritual voyage to transcendental knowledge or a heightened awareness of the spiritual force of the universe (Magnuson, 1974: 50). Vlasopolos reads the poem as one which follows the general pattern of romantic quests in terms of the hero's psychic pilgrimage (365).

All these critics seem to be missing one essential point: this poem is a nightmare and like all nightmares, it is horrifying and often irrational. So, it is in vain to try to impose a rational order or a cause-and-effect relationship upon such a dream scape. It is true that Coleridge devoted his intellectual energies in his prose to assert a universe of order and benevolence where man possessed freedom of will and action

to mould his own destiny. However, throwing this biographical light upon the poem at the expense of ignoring the text would be an error. The "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" envisions a universe in which man is at the mercy of arbitrary and unpredictable forces : this is the poet's nightmare and his fundamental fear. This is no benevolent and harmonious universe. If it is a Christian universe, it can only be a medieval Catholic or a Puritan one with a ruthless god who metes out punishment.

What is even more important is the force governing this universe : chance. We are reminded of Hardy's words:

*Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.*

(*"Hap"*, II. 11-14)

The punishment of the mariner and his shipmates depends upon chance. The spectre crew of Death and Life-in-Death gamble for them.

*The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice ;
"The game is done ! I've won! I've won!"
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.*

.....
*Four times fifty living men,
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump'
They dropped down one by one.*

(II. 210-214, 251-255)

The clear implication of the dice game is that it negates any attempt to impose a systematic philosophical or religious interpretation onto the poem. Moreover, it brings to the foreground the question of whether the mariner is himself responsible for the act of evil. The punishment seems to be out of proportion with the crime. What about his comrades ? The gamblers have the same contempt for their lives as the mariner had for the albatross. They die one by one, falling down just like flies. The arbitrariness and the ruthlessness of the ruling powers is in sharp contrast to the view of the poem as a tract on universal benevolism and the religion of nature (Fairchild, 1949: 293). The Christian God who loves all His creation seems to have absented Himself from this universe ; instead there is a threatening God at work, who implies that even the most trivial violation of his rules will bring undeserved and prolonged punishment. Not even Christ comes to man's rescue:

*Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide sea!
And Christ would take no pity on
My soul in agony.*

(II. 267-271)

The last lines of the poem are no more than ironic:

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

(II. 696-700)

Obsessed and under tension, the mariner does not have the serenity and the peace of mind that the lines above imply. On the contrary, he is nervous, and jittery, as one "possessed". The would-be moral redeems neither the mariner nor the wedding-guest. Instead of the "One-Life", we are confronted with two alienated beings at the end of the poem. The wedding-guest can no longer partake in the joy of the marriage feast, which is the real "one-life". The wisdom the mariner shares with him does not lie in the pious moral message of the importance of universal love and charity, but perhaps in the agreement that man can escape punishment only through fear and enforced obedience. He understands how powerless man actually is and the vanity of trying to exercise one's own will-power. His illusion of freedom is stripped away and he is revealed as quite helpless. The poet discusses in a gothic nightmare- setting what he was unwilling to face in daylight : the absence of order and of a benevolent power. Thus the poem transcribes Coleridge's fears about a chaotic universe.

Coleridge's doubts about the absence of a universal order and justice are disclosed once again in "Christabel". This is not a world where equity reigns, not a world where the good is rewarded and the bad is punished. For Coleridge, the paralysis of innocence under the force of evil appears to be another deep-set fear which found its way from the unconscious to the conscious via the medium of the gothic. Evil, the antithetical force to innocence, is often regarded as an inherently active and strong principle of energy, whereas innocence is passive, weak, and vulnerable. In Western thought, evil is often seen as a cosmic presence. Conceptually, the influence of Milton's Satan has been great and descending from the fallen Angel, Evil has always been depicted as a strong but nonetheless ambiguous force. Its ambiguity or vagueness owes much to its unknowability. Being such, legends, fairy tales, myths, and gothic stories with their hazy backgrounds have provided poets with the proper setting to depict the relationship between evil and innocence.

In the romantic tradition, William Blake was the first to deal extensively with the subject of evil. He devoted two entire sets of poems to innocence and experience. His songs of experience take as their point of departure the presence of evil in our immediate environment. Evil is present in nature and in human society. It is the basic force which destroys our native faith in the order, harmony, and goodness of the universe and changes the sweet state of innocence into the bitterness of experience. The relationship between innocence and experience is not merely one of contrast but involves a cycle from a simple innocence into experience and then to a different, more complex innocence, which, without rejecting experience, transcends it in imaginative vision. Blake's attitude shows intellectual maturity and has a mystical touch to it. Strongly influenced by his father's religion, Swedenborgianism, Blake

could behold the spiritual essence within all material things and had great faith in his power to transcend beyond his mortal limits. This prevents his poetry from being dark and depressing. Regarding the relationship between innocence and evil, the same cannot be said for the view of Coleridge. Presenting a world where innocence simply cannot function, his outlook is much darker.

Coleridge's "Christabel" is an unfinished poem belonging to the triad of mystery poems. The poet is again exploring the human psyche via the gothic and dealing with his fear of evil which can overpower innocence. The poem exhibits a conflict between some kind of embodied evil in the shape of a beautiful woman named Geraldine, and the natural grace and innocence of a young girl called Christabel. The poet's depiction of evil is fascinating, mysterious, erotic, and ultimately terrifying. Coleridge adopts a tone of Gothic horror to comment on the effect of evil on innocence. The Gothic imagery employed in the poem is not only stylistically but also thematically instrumental in revealing the immediacy and fear of the approaching encounter between innocence and evil, and later its horrifying results. The eerie night scene is depicted according to Gothic conventions:

*Is the night chilly and dark?
The night is chilly, but not dark.
The thin gray cloud is spread on high,
It covers but not hides the sky.
The moon is behind and at the full.*

(II. 13-17)

The cock, the herald of dawn, is awakened at midnight by the cries of the owls, contributing to the ominous atmosphere. Coleridge carefully creates an air of chilling suspense when, amidst the oak trees, Christabel is startled by a moan and sees Geraldine. It must be noted that the innocent Christabel sees at first only a strange and beautiful woman in Geraldine. But as her awareness of evil grows, Geraldine will gradually be transformed in her sight from that beautiful woman into a hideous hag. Christabel's fright at first seeing Geraldine resembles that of the mariner upon seeing the nightmare Life-in-Death whose skin is as white as leprosy. As the hermit asks the mariner, "What manner of man art thou?", Christabel asks:

*"Mary mother save me now!
...And who art thou?"*

(II. 61-62)

Christabel personifies the limitations of innocence in her obliviousness to the presence of evil and in her vulnerability to its effects. Her innocence blinds her so that without suspecting that there may be something to fear, she promises the hospitality and protection of her father's hall to Geraldine. Her carrying Geraldine across the threshold exemplifies the common folk theme that evil beings cannot enter a sanctified place unaided. Moreover, we have a woman carrying another woman in her arms, like a groom who carries his bride across the threshold. This scene is vaguely erotic in a lesbian sense. It seems to suggest a love relation, a perverted one

according to Coleridge's presumably Orthodox view, between good and evil.

*The lady sank, belike through pain,
And Christabel with might and main
Lifted her up, a weary weight,
Over the threshold of the gate:
Then the lady rose again,
And moved, as she were not in pain.*

(II. 119-124)

Geraldine is simultaneously the dissembling Gothic villainess and Satan's descendant who delights in ruining goodness. The restorative spirituality Christabel offers Geraldine is answered by Geraldine's impressing her mark upon Christabel:

*In the touch of my bosom there worketh a spell,
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!
Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to - morrow
The mark of my shame, the seal of my sorrow;*

(II. 245-248)

Here, Coleridge is dealing with the almost sexual seductiveness of evil. Geraldine's spell ensures that Christabel is not going to be able to tell anyone of her secret. When Christabel sees the mark on Geraldine's bosom ("a sight to dream of, not to tell!" (11.238)), evil formerly hidden is exposed. Geraldine's laying herself down by Christabel's side and taking the girl in her arms brings to mind also the question whether Coleridge is associating homosexuality or lesbianism with evil. Maybe the sight of Geraldine's breasts is so shocking for Christabel because this is her first encounter with the "ugliness" or the "evil" that may exist in a bosom which looks similar to her own.

Innocence and evil seem to enjoy a forbidden relationship, which is between two of the same kind. Then, one may indeed fear that innocence and evil are cut from the same cloth. In other words, evil may inhere with innocence.

As Christabel tries to sleep, she is imprisoned in a nightmare of sorrow and shame. Yet, she is still innocent believing that her guardian mother and her saint will come to her rescue, she prays in her sleep:

*"But this she knows, in joys and woes,
That saints will aid if men will call:
For the blue sky bends over all."*

(II. 306-308)

In the face of evil, this simplistic faith proves inadequate. Christabel realizes that the coming of the day has not wiped out the horror of the previous night. Ironically, in the morning Geraldine is infused with physical strength. Just like a vampire, she has sucked the life out of Christabel

*And Christabel awoke and spied
 The same who lay down by her side
 O rather say, the same whom she
 Raised up beneath the old oak tree!
 Nay, fairer yet! and yet more fair!
 For she belike hath drunken deep
 Of all the blessedness of sleep!
 And while she spake her looks, her air
 Such gentle thankfulness declare,
 That (so it seemed) her girded vests
 Grew tight beneath her heaving breasts.*

(II. 370-380)

Christabel is literally spell-bound; innocence is paralyzed. She can no longer impose herself or act on her own initiative. As her father, Sir Leoline, embraces Geraldine,

*..... a vision fell
 Upon the soul of Christabel,
 The vision foul of fear pain!

 Again she saw that bosom old,
 Again she felt that bosom cold,
 And drew in her breath with a hissing sound.*

(II. 429-431; 435-437)

Christabel's descent hastens Geraldine's corresponding ascent. As one gets weaker, the other becomes all the more powerful. The sorrow and paralysis which Geraldine inflicts on Christabel and her effect on Sir Leoline show the triumph of evil. It is only Bard Bracy, the poet, who is alert to the hidden truth. His symbolic dream about the dove and the snake is proof of the "poetic vision". He, as a poet, is endowed with a special gift of intuiting the reality undetected by ordinary men. He senses that Christabel - the dove - is threatened by Geraldine - the snake. But he cannot communicate his meaning to Sir Leoline who misinterprets the dream. Meekly, Bracy obeys his master and rather than finding some forceful way to alert him to the truth and rescue Christabel, he departs as he is ordered. His helplessness is symbolically the failure of the poet and the moral power of poetry in fighting evil.

Thus evil has paralyzed not only the innocent victim but also the poet who is the gifted seer. Here are Coleridge's fears and doubts regarding the effectiveness of poetry as an agent of human redemption. Knowing biographically that after having written Part II of "Christabel", Coleridge turned to theology and politics, one may guess that the reason for his leaving the poem unfinished could be that he saw himself - as poet - in Bard Bracy's position.

If "Christabel" is about the trial of innocence by evil, then the statement that the fragment makes is quite clear: innocence is sentenced to lifelong imprisonment. Innocence, unequipped with the necessary means to fight against evil, is doomed to

lose. Christabel is paralyzed; it is impossible for her to transcend beyond that stage to a complex and intellectually sophisticated Blakean stage of experience. Not only her own innocence but the guardian spirit of her mother, her religious faith, her father and her poet have proved ineffective in the face of evil and they have in a sense betrayed her. Apparently, there is no power to protect the innocent Christabel; she is left on her own and there is no hope for justice: in Coleridge's nightmare vision of the universe, moral order is conspicuous by its total absence.

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