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«How a Ship, having passed the Line, was driven by storms». The metaphorical journey of *The Ancient Mariner*

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«HOW A SHIP, HAVING PASSED THE LINE, WAS DRIVEN BY STORMS». THE METAPHORICAL JOURNEY OF *THE ANCIENT MARINER*

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Riassunto: L'articolo esamina l'utilizzo dell'espediente della navigazione da parte di Samuel Taylor Coleridge nel poema *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), ove il movimento difficoltoso della nave è metafora di alienazione e sofferenza cristiana. Nella ballata la questione del divino è costantemente reiterata e rappresenta il fulcro della teoria estetica dell'autore, nonché di tutta la sua poetica. Coleridge, nelle vesti di filosofo naturale, associa l'ira divina al sublime romantico ed esplora i temi del peccato e del pentimento attraverso un viaggio fisico, spirituale e introspettivo inteso a culminare nella salvezza. L'esplorazione del paesaggio diviene, così, una forma di escapismo e la nave al largo una complessa metafora religiosa, culturale, politica e sociale.

Abstract: The article examines Samuel Taylor Coleridge's use of navigation in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), in which the motionless ship becomes a metaphor for alienation and Christian suffering. In the poem the question of the divine is constantly reiterated, thus becoming the centre of both the author's aesthetic theory and poetics. As a natural philosopher, Coleridge associates divine wrath with the concept of the Sublime and explores the themes of sin and repentance through a physical, spiritual and introspective journey that ends in redemption. In the poem 'landscape' rhymes with 'mindscape' and the ship in the open sea becomes a complex religious, cultural, political and social metaphor.

Parole chiave: Coleridge, navigazione, Sublime romantico, paesaggio, redenzione, esplorazione

Key words: Coleridge, Navigation, Romantic Sublime, Landscape, Redemption, Exploration

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Coleridge's criticism generally operates in terms of what is, perhaps, the author's most significant literary achievement, namely the formulation of the primary and secondary imagination, a twofold theory on the mechanisms of perception. Primary imagination is that human feature which allows us first to gather information about the reality that surrounds us and then to visualise, identify and sort out pre-existing material. Secondary imagination is the visionary and poetic faculty to process and synthetise stimuli, forge new images and articulate expressions. Some may argue that even though Coleridge made a clear distinction between these two, contiguous phases of the creative process, this one must be seen as a consistent, indivisible whole. This overarching and complex system moves between the Kantian sensibility and understanding, empiricism and transcendence. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1797-98), Coleridge's poetic masterpiece, can be seen as «a paradigm of the workings of secondary imagination [in which] the shooting of the albatross is not merely a transgression against God and nature, but also a crime against imagination».[1] Coleridge's necessity to suspend time and introduce the theme of sin and isolation in the poem expands the gap between reality and its projection and reflects the poet's belief that «whatever having true being is not contemplatable in the forms of time and space».[2] Seafaring and navigation serve his purpose well, as the poet resorts to a symbolic ship and to a frightful sea landscape to represent alienation, as if he wanted to force man to confront nature in a remote spot, leaving him astray and unable to escape. The vessel (a fixed token of the empirical world) and the watery

1 Charlotte H. Beck, *Robert Penn Warren, Critic*, Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 2006, p. 58.

2 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Literary Remains*, Vol. III, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, Frankfurt am Main, Outlook Verlag GmbH, 2018 [1836], p. 239.

environment (the metaphysical one) blend into a single, colour palette, like a «painted ship upon a painted ocean» (*AM* 2.117-8).[3]

The mariner's ship soon becomes a moving observation post from which the characters stargaze and contemplate the deadly game of nature. Once the harbour and the shore have faded out, a mountainous geography is revealed, beautifully wrapped in a shroud of mist. As the narrative proceeds (or as the ship moves), the light becomes dimmer and the atmosphere gloomier. The natural elements which normally help navigators find their bearings become impractical and unreliable. The landscape, uncharted and unrecognisable, constitutes a No-Man's Land, the embodiment of the unknown and of anything that is beyond human reach. The menacing (and at the same time restful and reassuring) supremacy of the Romantic Sublime is now framed by real-life elements (marriage, tradition, celebration), now by cultural references (the fading skyline, the kirk, the lighthouse, the seafaring ship).

Coleridge transfigured those realistic elements Wordsworth held dear, entrusting to nature the responsibility of pushing the reader into the whirlwind of a cathartic experience. In this regard, travel and navigation represent a spiritual journey; the slow, horizontal movement of the becalmed ship reflects the ascensional movement of the mariner's repented soul. There is no direction on the flat, lifeless, «sunless»[4] sea Coleridge depicts. Not a slice of land in sight. The theme of loss and bewilderment are intertwined with those of sin and distrust. Layer upon layer, the powerful warning of the ballad and its explicit moral – respectively the consequence of desecration and the appreciation of life and biodiversity[5] – are built starting from the sea voyage and its symbolism. The sailing ship is one of literature's oldest metaphors for life and for spiritual growth. Seafarers find themselves on their quest for truth: they embark on a voyage of

3 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in Id., *The Complete Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. William Keach, London, Penguin, 1997, EPub Edition. Further references to the text are taken from the same edition, specifically the 1834 version, and abbreviated *AM*. The sequence indicates the part (2) and the verse numbers (117-8). All direct quotations from the text will be referenced as above; references in round brackets which are not preceded by any abbreviation refer to this same source.

4 «Down to a sunless sea» (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan,* verse 5, in Id., *The Complete Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, cit., p. 632).

5 Hubert Zaps calls the poem a Romantic «ecological trauma narrative» (Hubert Zaps, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts,* London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 218).

self-discovery to come back as different persons, enlightened and reconciled to life. To do so, they must get rid of past, unhealthy patterns and let in the new.

The open sea (or any body of water) conjures up a multitude of emotions, the kinds that we can hardly ever explain or dominate. Water is also connected to our deepest fears, while ships symbolically serve to explore and navigate the surface of such tribulations. To Jung and Freud, water is the quintessence of the subconscious, it is that intimate element which refers to the prenatal stage. Besides, as the ballad also suggests, water is a space contended both by life and death. It contextually has the power to give and regenerate life and to deprive men of it; suffice it to think that, in ancient times, the word *amníon* designated the amniotic sac and a vessel used to contain the blood of sacrificial victims. The sea is a brutal tyrant, a bringer of death. It is a vast, rotten cemetery which swallows wrecks and conceals its mysteries. Indeed, thalassophobia is a theme which cuts through the entire narration, although it is mostly perceived from the outside; the sublime elements of the subpolar environment and the boundless dimension of the sea strike the reader, while the mariner is more concerned about what is happening on board the vessel, namely the lack of drinking water and the effects of his own unbearable shame and guilt. The undead mariner leads the cursed crew (the representation of mankind and universal agony) through the many stages of their spiritual pathway: ignorance and wander, superstition, sin, forgiveness, awakening and, ultimately, absolution. The mariner, a romantic Charon, ferries the dead seamen across an infernal Styx, whose putrid and stagnant waters mirror his ruinous immorality.

In *The Rime*, as well as in *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel* (1816), the sensory experience is as important as Coleridge's attentiveness to details and ordinary things. Beneath the timeless and oneiric nature of the ballad lies the author's acquaintance with and internalisation of sensible, phenomenal reality. The construction and rendition of fantastic elements is so relatable, so likely that the air itself becomes thick as the ghostly creatures take on perturbing, yet distinguishable human features.[6] Coleridge goes beyond the mere stimulation of the reader's imagination; it is as if his writing projected, 'impressed' a distinct image into our vision, putting on a spooky show, a phantasmagoria. Similarly, all the elements pertaining to the world of seafaring and navigation affect our perception and contribute to fix-

6 Death is described as having red lips, light hair and a fair and sickly complexion.

ing reality in the context of what, without the ship, an external reference, would just seem a «round objectless desert of waters».[7] To us, as well as to Coleridge's contemporaries, the ship is a constant vector: it is the only artificial element to be surrounded by an endless, natural space. It is the only trace left by the passage of man, and a testament to the evolution of craftmanship and human intervention.

In a letter to Wordsworth, while commenting on the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Charles Lamb (who, besides being one of the most important literary critics and biographers of the time, was also a friend of Coleridge's) reflected upon the impetuous power wielded by nature in such terms: «For me, I was never so affected with any human tale. After first reading it, I was totally possessed with it for many days. I dislike all the miraculous part of it, but the feelings of the man under the operation of such scenery, dragged me along like Tom Piper's magic whistle».[8] In the aftermath of the shooting of the albatross, nature soon manifests its hostility through silence: «No sweet bird did follow»; «We did speak only to break / The silence of the sea» (*AM* 2.88; 109-110). The abrupt absence of geographic and temporal references is the first plague to descend upon the ship. The lack of wind and wildlife amplifies the sense of disorientation and impossibility to advance. Thus, the travel experience is hampered by the elements and through a general conspiracy of the cosmos. The ship is personified and becomes a battered body, now dragged, now beaten, now starved. The roaring, impetuous wind attacks its thin sails, making them «sigh like sedge» (5.319).

The old mariner's voyage is a *nòstos* in the classical definition, for it alludes to a symbolic crossing and ascribes to return narrative, though it overtly upsets its conventional rules. Coleridge gives the wheel to an anti-hero who ironically is too old and too experienced to learn his life lessons. Acting on a momentary impulse, he shoots the albatross and denies his own maturity and awareness. But he also denies God and His work and because of this, he returns to the primordial state of his evolutionary process. Cruising itself is a synonym for progression and transcendence; Odysseus commits *hybris* by sailing past the Pillars of Hercules and by relying solely on his intellect and navigational skills. In Dante's *Inferno* the Homeric galley, which epitomises man's potentiality, titanism and re-

7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, Eugene, OR, Wipf & Stock, 2005 [1817], p. 246.

8 Charles Lamb, *The Works of Charles Lamb, Including his most interesting letters*, ed. Thomas Noon Talfourd, London, Bell and Daldy, 1867, p. 223.

bellion, sinks «sì com'altrui piacque»:[9] as God commands, the wind rises from an unknown land and hits the bow. Similarly, the mariner's ship is nature's first target, though not in a physical sense. No part of it comes out damaged until the epilogue,[10] when, once the mariner approaches the hermit's boat, it sinks as if it had finally served its purpose. The act of sinking is particularly meaningful in this context. It represents the end of a cycle: acceptance, forgiveness, and release. At the end of the fourth part, as soon as the mariner has done blessing[11] the horribly beautiful sea creatures – such marvels of creation – the albatross he is forced to wear around his neck as a reminder of his hellish deed finally falls off and sinks «like lead into the sea».[12]

The relation between the bird and the ship, namely the two elements which the sea claims and attracts back, is quite moving. In one of Gustave Doré's delightful illustrations of the ballad, the albatross is perching on the rim of the vessel as the crew, either frightened or amazed, step back in wonder. Generally, in nautical lore, the sighting of an albatross was a fortuitous occurrence, as it was common belief that petrels (to which albatrosses belong) were «legendary water prophet[s], forecasting winds and bad weather».[13] Besides, legend also has it that mariners thought killing them was unlucky, though «this belief was not as widespread as has been supposed, for sailors used to slay these birds to make tobacco pouches from the webbing of their feet»[14] as well as «pipe stems from their wing bones».[15] This double and ambiguous outlook on the albatross is blatant in the ballad. If the seamen initially curse the mariner for his misdeed and for having slayed the bird «that made the breeze to blow» (2.94), at sunrise they become convinced that he has actually «killed the bird / That

9 Lit. "As decreed by somebody else" (Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, XXVI, 133, in Id. *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Giuseppe Vandelli, Milano, Ulrico Hoepli, 1989, p. 308).

10 With the exception of the second part, where we understand that the excess of water causes the boards to shrink.

11 The mariner shows Christian compassion in the narrowest sense; he suffers (in the Latin sense of *cum-patior*) with and in the same way as the sea creatures surrounding him.

12 Cf. Coleridge: «the silence sank / Like music on my heart» (*AM*, 6.498-9).

13 Cassandra Eason, *Fabulous Creatures, Mythical Monsters and Animal Power Symbols: A Handbook*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 2008, p. 63.

14 Edward A. Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds*, London, Collins, 2009 [1958], EBook Edition, p. 429.

15 Robin W. Doughty, *Saving the Albatross: fashioning an Environmental Regime*, «Geographical Review», vol. 100, 2, 2010, pp. 216-228: 221.

brought the fog and mist» (2.99-100). This double, contradictory approach reminds us of a deplorable habit mariners used to have to kill albatrosses «for meat [or] for the pleasure of wager or just to pass the time. On occasion they kept the big awkward seabirds alive on the deck, mocking their ungainly steps».[16]

Wordsworth suggested his friend had taken inspiration from the Royal Navy officer George Shelvocke for his victimized albatross, specifically from his *Voyage Round the World by Way of the Great South Sea* (1726). The commander of the Speedwell reported in his journal that, while sailing the South seas in unfavourable weather conditions, Simon Hatley, his second captain, who had been observing for quite some time a black albatross hovering above their ship[17] «after some fruitless attempts […] shot the *Albatross*, not doubting (perhaps) that [they] should have a fair wind after it».[18] Coleridge reworked the anecdote and elevated it by turning it into a sensational story. Starting from that simple, relatively uninteresting event he built what today is a universal tale of Christian tradition. The choice to change the setting from South America to a point at an incalculable distance from the Equator is quite telling. As a matter of common knowledge, the equatorial climate is characterised by consistently high temperatures which, as the ship is driven by a storm towards the South Pole, create a contrast with the emerald green ice, foggy sky and snowy cliffs the sailors encounter. Such evocative, 'sublimised' literary expedients highlight the sensation of 'hot and cold' Coleridge experiments sensorially. Overall, the visual synaesthesia of the poem is superb.[19]

The mariner's profanation causes a total disruption of the supreme order: nature is corrupted, and its cycles reversed. The sun stops rising from the left and «hid[es] in mist» (2.85) before setting in the East to complete its demonic, disquieting transit. Everything is pushed to the limits: the ship either comes to a standstill or drives fast, escorted by an unidentifiable wind. It is either floods or utter drought.[20] The albatross is

16 *Ibid*. The albatross/poet of the eponymous poem by Charles Baudelaire testifies this aberrant fact; the bird's strange beauty, the symbol of the poet's ideological quest for the different and the peculiar, elicits fear of diversity.

17 Cf. Coleridge: «Round and round it flew» (*AM*, 1.68).

18 George Shelvocke, *A Voyage Round the World by Way of the Great South Sea: Perform'd in the Years 1719, 20, 21, 22…*, London, Printed for J. Senex, 1726, p. 73.

19 Cf. «Copper sky»; «bloody Sun»; «awful red»; «shining white»; «golden fire», etc. (*AM* 2.111; 112; 4.271; 274; 281).

20 See the strong contrast between the rotting, slimy sea, the water which has the consistency of «a witch's *oils*» (concoctions, emphasis added) and the sailors' parched

now a bird of ill omen, now a symbol of crucifixion. Duality (a Christological nexus to the doctrine of Duophysism) permeates the ballad, as the mariner's own nature and disposition suggest, together with the opposing internal forces driving him. Two are the unearthly creatures tossing dice to determine his fate, two are the external voices conversing in the sixth part and two are the rescuers approaching at the end (the Pilot and the Pilot's boy). The divine masculine (the Sun, personalised and identified as «he») takes turns with the divine feminine (the Moon, personalised and identified as «she»).

Time and space are affected, too, by this diabolical twisting. There are a few elements which mark the story time which we assume coincides with the late medieval period (being the form and metre of the ballad typically medieval, as well as the use of archaisms such as 'rime' and 'ancient'). Doré's vision, instead, is a child of its time and reflects a perfect Victorian taste. Since Coleridge mentions the Antarctic, it comes naturally to assume that the story he tells takes place during the Age of Discovery, though no historical era «permits a vantage point perceptually sufficient to establish both space and time positions at once».[21] In the Romantic age the exploration of polar regions was crucial, as «magnetism was a central issue for science and polar expeditions».[22] Historically, before James Cook headed towards the Antarctic mainland without seeing it,[23] the navigation of the Southern polar region had been attempted by Shelvocke in the 1720s. Coleridge was familiar with their accounts. Overall, he was probably consciously contemplating time in an absolute sense, making its interception (and perception) eternal and nonlinear. In other words: open and unclear. The mariner's body and appearance confirm the non-definition of time. We cannot place the events with certainty. Since the mariner is called 'ancient' by his shipmates, the story he tells cannot be a recollection of his past youth. Time is frozen and stands still; being forced to retell and re-evoke his tragedy indefinitely, the mariner is eternally old.

throats (2.129; 3.143).

21 Lynn M. Grow, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: Coleridge's Scientific and Philosophic Insights*, in Mark Neuman, Michael Payne eds., *Self, Sign and Symbol*, Lewishburgh, Bucknell UP, 1987, pp. 45-71: 57.

22 Siv Frøydis Berg, *Fixating the Poles: Science, Fiction, and Photography at the Ends of the World*, in Helge Jordheim, Erling Sandmo eds., *Conceptualizing the World: An Exploration across Disciplines*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2019, pp. 356-372: 359.

23 Cook only found thick fogs, snowstorms and ice-hills (cf. Paul Simpson-Housley, *Antarctica: Exploration, Perception and Metaphor*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 113).

Sometimes, the parts of the ship and the movement of celestial bodies in the sky clarify the alternation of day and night: «the mast at noon»; «the bloody sun at noon» (1.30; 2.112). Other times, the passing of time is indicated, but remains unspecified: «day after day»; «there passed a weary time»; «the day was well nigh done» (2.115; 3.143,172). The duration of time is also used to disguise numerology and biblical allusions. For instance, the albatross perches «for vespers nine» (1.76), as in Christian liturgy. The mariner stands the sight of the dead men's cursing gaze for seven days and seven nights, a number which represents completeness (notice there are seven parts composing the ballad). The number of the doomed comrades (two hundred, the «four times fifty living men», 3.216) is the exact hundredfold quantity of the characters aboard the pirate ship who come to claim their souls: «And is that Woman all her crew? / Is that a DEATH? And are there two?» (3.187-8). The number also gives us indication of the dimension of the mariner's ship, which most likely is a galley transporting, according to some theories, a bunch of infirm men. In this respect, Debbie Lee associates the ecstatic and hallucinatory visions described in the ballad to the yellow fever outbreak of the West Indies in the eighteenth century. The disease, which notoriously affected the body with violent pain and bursts of cold and heat, caused the patients' eyes to be watery and yellowy and turned their skin light brown.[24] As a result, the mariner's glittering eye and skinny, brown hand the wedding guest does not dare touch[25] could indicate he has contracted the fever and managed to outlive his companions. Besides, as Lee interestingly suggests,

> in the poem's infected environment, the very markers that identify the mariner as a British sailor (the 'brown hand'), also designate him a slave. He is linked to the bodies of Africans not only through his color, but also through his health. When the mariner assures his listener, «Fear not, fear not thou Wedding Guest! / This body dropt not down» (4.230-31), he acknowledges his own immunity to the fever that struck down all two hundred shipmates, an immunity that implicitly aligns him with the alterity of the slave.[26]

24 "Jaundice" is the medical term.

25 Cf. Coleridge: «I fear thee, ancient Mariner! / I fear thy skinny hand! / And thou art long, and lank, and brown / As is the ribbed sea-sand» (*AM*, 4. 224-7).

26 Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p. 54.

If we considered this theory to be valid, this would give the concept of 'life-in-death', also known as the 'Nightmare', a whole new meaning. The mariner is either an actual sufferer from the disease or just a carrier. In any case, the fact still remains that back in the day the yellow fever infection was deadlier to Europeans and became the scourge of seamen and port operators. Coleridge's political engagement against the slave trade, instead, is contained in a hundred-line Sapphic ode which earned him the «prestigious Browne medal for Greek composition in 1792 at Cambridge».[27] It is a hyper sentimentalised poem, which nevertheless reveals the poet's sparking activism and commitment in addressing the question of abolition in Western India:

> […] For I grieve deeply
> With the race of slaves suffering dire ills,
> Just as they groan with unspeakable grief,
> So they circle around in eddies of loathsome
> Labours, Children of Necessity.[28]

The slaves of the ode, described as the «wretched ones» (*WL*, 40) induced to «sweet delusion with the / shadows of hope that appear in dreams» (*WL,* 41-2) mirror the mariner's fellows, gripped by fatigue and exhaustion. It is possible that Coleridge's intent was to create an alternative, imaginary slave trade route that could simulate the inhuman travel conditions of slaves on European ships. In the fifth part the ship finally moves on, and the dead men rise and begin to pull the ropes by «rais[ing] their limbs like lifeless tools» (*AM* 5.339). While the mechanical movements of the mariners simulate those of the vessel, their industriousness, even in death, reaffirms their condition as slaves and as outcasts. In general, Coleridge's own knowledge of maritime life and ventures is quite evident in the poem. He himself «had been much among ships and mariners in Bristol[29] […] and the sea was to him a daily sight».[30]

27 Marcus Wood, *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764-1865*, Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 205.

28 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, «On the Wretched Lot of the Slaves in the Isles of Western India» [1792], vv. 23-27, in Id., *The Complete Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, cit., p. 1054. Further references are abbreviated as *WL* and the verse numbers.

29 At Bristol, Coleridge gave brilliant lectures on Shakespeare and Milton between 1813 and 1814.

30 Eliakim Littell, Robert S. Littell, *Littell's Living Age, Volume 180*, Boston, T.H. Carter &

The fact that in the sixth stanza of the *Rime* a picturesque «kirk»[31] is described as part of the mariner's «own Countree» confirms the crew moves «beyond Britain's geographical borders»,[32] and by extension the mariner's nationality. There is a curious analogy in the *Biographia Literaria*. In the first of the three Satyrane's letters,[33] which perfectly adapts to the style of the travel journal, Coleridge describes a voyage he had once embarked on with the Wordsworths and John Chester (a native of Stowey and one of Coleridge's acolytes). On 16th September, 1798 (the year the ballad appeared) the passengers, bound for Hamburg,[34] set sail from Yarmouth and farewelled the Norfolk coast. Coleridge writes:

> for the first time in my life, I beheld my native land retiring from me. At the moments of its disappearance – in all the kirks, churches, chapels, and meeting-houses, in which the greater number, I hope, of my countrymen were at that time assembled, I will dare question whether there was one more ardent prayer offered up to heaven, than that which I then preferred for my country. «Now then», said I […] «we are out of our country».[35]

The resonance is not just limited to the few lines opening the poem where the mariner looks at his native shore with a beholder's glance,[36] as Coleridge goes on to relate the details of a safe but eventful journey, full of encounters with eccentric strangers, episodes of sea sickness and sudden rainfall. Coleridge's observation of the surrounding landscape is, as ever, accompanied by visions of magnitude and intensity, to the point where his description almost looks like a prose translation of some of his most accomplished quatrains:

> I wrapped myself in my great coat and looked at the water. A beautiful white cloud of foam at momently intervals coursed by the side of the vessel with a roar, and little stars of flame danced and sparkled and went out in

Company, 1889, p. 495.

31 The term is Scottish.

32 Debbie Lee, *art. cit.,* p. 53.

33 The reference is to Sir Satyrane, a character of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

34 A place he would soon leave to travel to Göttingen, where he matriculated at the University to study literature and philosophy. During his stay, Coleridge met some prominent intellectuals including Blumenbach.

35 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, cit., p. 238.

36 «The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared, / Merrily did we drop / Below the kirk, below the hill, / Below the lighthouse top» (*AM*, 1.21-4).

> it […] In looking up at two or three bright stars, which oscillated with the motion of the sails, I fell asleep […] The long trembling road of moonlight, which lay on the water and reached to the stern of our vessel, glimmered dimly and obscurely.[37]

Eventually, the travellers pass a «multitude of English traders that had been waiting many weeks for a wind»,[38] a coincidence which draws a further parallel with Coleridge's emblematic poem. Indeed, any autobiographical elements are vital to the genesis and the architecture of the work which Coleridge revised multiple times, though we cannot establish with absolute certainty what influenced what, how much of his reverie reflected his real-life experience and vice versa. It is safe to say that he took many inspirations and referred to a plurality of social conditions and historical events, merging them into an extraordinarily complex vision. The same idea for his *Rime* came from Wordsworth, Shelvocke and a Mr. Cruickshank, Coleridge's neighbour and a landholder who told him about a strange dream he once had about «a skeleton ship with figures in it».[39]

As already noted, sea voyages have, for Coleridge, an intimate meaning of transformation, regeneration, and break with the past. His failed Pantisocracy project started from this very premise, from the disillusionment with the French Revolution and a bitter mistrust in political action. Not surprisingly, the embryo of this Neoplatonic ideal state was a ship transporting twelve intellectuals joined by twelve women (among Coleridge and Robert Southey's intimates), all sharing the prospect of procreation and merrily sailing to the Fortunate Lands. As is well known, the disagreements between the two Pantisocrats kept anything from being done, and «the stately ship that was built for such high emprise drifted away indeed into the quicksands of shame and failure».[40] But political disillusionment was not the only factor that drove Coleridge overseas. He illusorily saw sea travel as a way to find relief from his acute rheumatism and consequent opium addiction. Since the damp English weather was to be avoided, Coleridge decided to sail off to the Mediterranean Sea, following the exam-

37 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, cit., p. 245.

38 *Ibid*., p. 246.

39 John Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of Imagination*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 204.

40 Mrs. Henry Sandford [Margaret E. Sandford], *Thomas Poole and His Friends* in E. C. Barton ed., *London Quarterly Review*, Vol. 72, London, T. Woolmer, 1889, pp. 229-240: 240.

ple of some of his acquaintances. In 1804 he joined a convoy of the Royal Navy to Malta. His was reportedly «one hell of a journey»[41] as he found himself «alone on a wide, wide sea for the first time, isolated by illness and opium: desperately sick, ill, abed»[42] with sea-legs and unable to sleep.

On June 17th, 1806, while *en route* for Leghorn, he wrote to his friend Washington Allston that a violent fever had been tormenting him for a fortnight before his departure. His head felt like another man's 'dead' head, while he displayed the symptoms of a «strange sense of numbness [accompanied by] violent attempts to vomit [and] involuntary and terrific screams».[43] Andrew and Suzanne Edwards suggest that while travelling on the *Gosport* and «agonizing over his health and future [Coleridge] must have mused on the *Ancient Mariner*».[44] The psychedelic trip described in the *Rime* recalls the hallucinatory effects of starvation, dehydration and motion sickness. Most surely, his knowledge of suppressants and their side effects inspired him. Indeed, the weakness of the body is a good plot device, as it permits the full expression of the infinite power of thought and the limitless resources of the human mind, as wide and as untameable as the sea. Besides, Coleridge – who had long been struggling with the excitement and dejection caused by his laudanum addiction – knew the delirium was a prison, as the image of the setting sun suggests when, in the third part of the poem, this one is seen through a metal grate.[45] The man's failed utterance, meaning his physical and metaphorical inability to speak, reflects both the paralysis of his body and the stillness of the ship («I moved, and could not feel my limbs» (5.305). A «weary time» passes, as the «weary eye» of the mariner looks at «the sky and the sea, the sea and the sky» (3.143, 146; 4.250). Yet, right there, amidst the silence and upon the rotting deck, as the guilt-ridden mariner watches over the fifty sailors lying at his feet, his mind becomes overactive. He keeps his lids closed and his eyes beat «like pulses» (249) under the burden of his violent vision.

41 William Christie, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Literary Life*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 158.

42 *Ibid*. Cf. also Kathleen Coburn, Anthony John Harding eds., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, *Vol. II*: *1804-1808*, London & New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2002 [1962], p. 2064.

43 Jared B. Flagg, *Life and Letters of Washington Allston*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892, p. 77.

44 Andrew Edwards, Suzanne Edwards, *Down To The Sunless Sea: A Troubled Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the Mediterranean*, Eastbourne, Sussex Academic Press, 2022, p. 141.

45 The dungeon bars are later identified in the poem as death's 'piercing' ribs.

The blue of the sea landscape pierces his mind, thus recreating the idea of a psychedelic-oneiric experience, or a religious ecstasy.[46] At this point the ultimate sublimation takes place: the sailors' corpses look beautiful in the old mariner's eyes, and so do the «thousand thousand slimy things» (238), the water-serpents which, like the Hydra, live on and proliferate in those putrid waters. He admires them first 'beyond' and then 'within' the shadow of the ship, meaning they are gradually approaching the vessel to circle it. But this also means that, as the man gains awareness, he looks at them from within and beyond his cognitive bias, finally seeing them as legitimate parts of the miracle of creation.[47]

In 1818 Théodore Géricault painted a scene which is well beyond bleak. The several victims lying on and sliding off the *Raft of the Medusa*, mutilated and decomposing, had famously gone through similar ordeals, surrounded by the same harsh landscape. But unlike the corpses of Géricault's oil, those lying at the mariner's feet do not rot, «nor reek» (4.254). The cold sweat «melt[s] from their limbs» (253), as if they were made of wax. This aberration creates a contrast with all the rest, for Coleridge makes both the sea and the deck rotting, decaying, and revolting. Like the Medusa survivors, the mariner practices a sort of self-cannibalism, wrapping his teeth around his arm and sucking his own blood like a vampire. His guilt and desire to atone seep inside the wedding guest's mind, who beats his chest to escape the man's torturous narration and, in doing so, seems to be reciting a *mea culpa*, as if the mariner's curse had rebounded. If, on the one hand, the old mariner breaks the law of nature and defies Christian morality by killing the albatross, on the other he and his crew refuse to apply maritime law and the abominable *Custom of the Sea*, which legitimised survival cannibalism among those who were adrift, provided the choice of the sacrificial member of the crew was made by drawing lots. In the ballad, it is Death and Life-In-Death who cast lots to win the lives of the sailors. Coleridge's metaphor might be as well a critique of

46 The short film *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1977) directed by Larry Jordan and narrated by Orson Welles is entirely based on the use of dynamic and colourful filters applied on Gustave Doré's illustrations. The cinematic effect alters the viewer's perception and simulates the hallucinatory states evoked in the ballad.

47 Hogarth's theorisation of the serpentine line as the ultimate expression and definition of beauty is all condensed in this part of the poem. Variety, intended as «the ornamental part of nature» enhances aesthetic beauty and gives character to the continuity and regularity of the form (cf. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, *With a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste*, London, W. Strahan, 1772, p. 16).

such protocol, a practice which, though rarely performed, could not exist in an advanced and civilised society.[48] From a legal perspective, it is hard to establish under which legislation the crew are, as they «enter territory for which there were no precedents».[49]

Whatever occurs on board, above and below the ship is, in fact, out of the ordinary. Irrationality and inexplicableness recall Br\ant and Bosch's *Ship of Fools*, a microcosm of aberration where society's morals are tested and where men persist in sinful habits. But redemption and endurance also mirror the legend of the Fisher King, the fallen guardian of the Grail paralysed by a physical disability. The stillness of the ship in *The Rime* resembles that of the Arthurian figure, while the mariner suffers the same penance. They both struggle and will continue to struggle offshore on their solitary boats. The indolence and stagnation pervading the ballad anticipate the mariner's acquiescence and allow him to embrace both spiritual and social redemption; as a matter of fact, he never acts, nor speaks as a moral agent, but remains passive in his punishment. The second-to-last stanza, which is partly dialogical, opens with an exchange between two unidentified characters who are observing the freaky motion of the mariner's ship. Both seem astounded by how the vessel moves swiftly in the absence of wind and waves. No driving force, nor sails or weathervane are there to signal any direction. The gentle weather and the high moon rock the ship, now clearly blown by a providential wind which escorts the mariner back to the white bay.

The encounter with the holy hermit, the first recipient of the story, is the mariner's last step towards redemption. He will eventually «shrieve [his] soul, [washing] away / The Albatross's blood» (6.512-3), a rite which recalls the cleansing power of the blood of Christ. This absolute moment of blessedness anticipates the last part, where the use of nautical terms and expressions intensifies and merges with religious language.[50] Thus, Coleridge's seafaring jargon becomes a sort of universal language uniting the few, dissociated characters, even the most isolated ones. The hermit «loves to talk with marineres / That come from a far countree» (6.517-8) and urges the rescuers to «Push on!» (540) as their boat approaches the ship. The

48 To some extent, in the Christian tradition the sacrament of Eucharist implicates cannibalism and condones the practice, even if only symbolically.

49 Stephen Bygrave, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, London, Northcote House (in association with the British Council), 1997, p. 5. Cf. «We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea» (2.105-6).

50 Cf. Coleridge: «The Devil knows how to row» (*AM*, 7.569).

vessel is drawn down into a vortex and sucked into the abyss, epitomising the end of an introspective and retrospective journey. The mariner, who initially could not hold, neither set his course, sublimates his remorse through self-sacrifice and sails back home. As he lives to tell the tale, he is bound to navigate those perilous waters again. If navigation takes on a metaphorical meaning and constitutes the central theme of the plot, it also reflects the logic and understanding of storytelling. As Kai Mikkonen suggests, not only is the travel metaphor «a way to think about narrative; it also provides one with the means to think through [it]»[51] and helps the reader conceptualise the story and navigate their way into a new literary experience. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* fully expresses the Romantic preoccupation with travel and polar exploration, as well as the issue of finding God in the remotest parts of the world and within one's innermost self and soul.

51 Kai Mikkonen, *The 'Narrative is Travel' Metaphor: Between Spatial Sequence and Open Consequence*, «Narrative» vol. 15, 3, 2007, pp. 286-305: 286.