One

Coleridge and the Subversion of Archetypes

The poet in his lone yet genial hour
Gives to his eyes a magnifying power:
Or rather he emancipates his eyes
From the black shapeless accidents of size—
In unctuous cones of kindling coal,
Or smoke upwreathing from the pipe’s trim bole,
His gifted ken can see
Phantoms of sublimity.

—S. T. Coleridge, “Apologia Pro Vita Sua”

While the first generation of romantics shared an aesthetic or even epistemological interest in the issue of representation, their poetry shows divergent understandings of the relation between sensation and imagination. These differences make it difficult to think of them as a generation at all, for two separate literary traditions can be discerned within this group. When Coleridge, in 1817, distinguished his poetic endeavor from that of his collaborator in Lyrical Ballads, he identified two traditions that would dominate nonrealist Western literature for the next two centuries. These traditions, generally associated with the romantic and symbolist movements, have been assumed by historical scholars to reach full expression in consecutive historical periods, but in fact the romantic and symbolist impulses are evident in the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge respectively and are continued in individual writers through the modern period. In the Biographia Literaria, Coleridge alludes to these respective traditions in his discussion of the “Occasion of the Lyrical Ballads,” where he consigns to Wordsworth the writing of poetry that exhibits “a faithful adherence to the truth of nature” and to himself poetry offering “the interest of novelty [given] by the modifying colours of imagination” (7, 2:5). Such a
distinction on Coleridge’s part indicates his sense of the clear differences between his own and Wordsworth’s verse. More importantly, the two kinds of poetry that Coleridge identifies reveal different models of mind which, in turn, presuppose different epistemologies, one associated with the dominant Christian-romantic episteme and the other with a heretical symbolist episteme that subverts the mythos and archetypes of the dominant culture.

Romantic criticism of the last few decades, most notably that of Abrams and Frye, has identified the Christian mythos as the basis of Wordsworthian romanticism. Coleridge offered a similar assessment, acknowledging the essential Christian nature of Wordsworth’s poetry in its “faithful adherence to the truth” of a natural world [emphasis added]. This mimetic poesis, in which the poet faithfully ratifies an innate sense of the truth of nature, suggests the cultural and religious orthodoxy of Wordsworth’s work, for “nature” is a cultural denotation for the works of God. As a symbolist, Coleridge requires of himself a more individual and humanistic task, to create “novelty” and to modify through imagination what is normally perceived as the natural world. In creating a supernatural poetic landscape, Coleridge seeks “to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (7, 2:6). Coleridge’s poetic endeavors offer a kind of literary heresy by supplanting the culturally sanctioned Christian faith with a human poetic faith. Similarly, his celebrated definition of the “Primary Imagination” depends on a religious analogy; Coleridge holds the Primary Imagination “to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (7, 1:304). Like a God of creation, the supernatural poet crosses into a region of the shadowy imagination and produces a semblance of truth which the adherents of culture would traditionally disbelieve. Entry into this shadowy world “awaken[s] the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom” and strips the
“film of familiarity” from our eyes (7, 2:7). But to gain admission to this imaginative world, the symbolist poet and his readers must, by a heretical leap of faith, cross this shadow-line and pass beyond the culture’s assumptions about the nature of reality. Once this heretical threshold is crossed, the symbolist poet frequently subverts the conventional images, symbols, language, or archetypes that collectively define the cultural epistememe, for he or she has entered a landscape of chaos in which a new reality must be defined.

Surely all the poetry in *Lyrical Ballads*, whether Christian or heretical, aspires to freshness of perception. But Coleridge more than Wordsworth projects the modifying colors of imagination, and in so doing celebrates the power of the human mind to transform a universal object or image of the natural world into a personal symbol. Such symbols, or “involutions,” as Coleridge calls them, are the basis of the symbolist aesthetic, for they transmit a complex of personal emotional associations and derive their meaning from an autonomous human source. Coleridge’s literary epistemology thus coincides closely with the symbolist vision of reality which embraces the imagination as a divine faculty (Daniel Schneider 1). From an epistemological standpoint, Coleridge’s creative process subverts the culture’s a priori sense of reality as revealed in conventional language, imagery, symbols, and archetypes. He entrusts his senses and imagination with the task of developing a personal apprehension of reality in which subject and object coalesce in the landscape created and inhabited by the poet. The poet is thus responsible for a heretical cosmogeny in which the natural world of the Christian mythos is supplanted by a supernatural landscape that is the text of the poem.

It is not surprising, given their preoccupation with the way poetic landscape reveals the functioning mind, that Wordsworth and Coleridge and most of their contemporaries as well should be so fond of the journey as a motif. The travel literature of the preceding century no doubt offered a model, for the Hebridean journals of Johnson and Boswell, the prose works of Swift and Defoe, and the novels of Smollet all raised questions
about culture and self in relation to the "otherness" of foreign lands; they ventured into unfamiliar territory in the phenomenal world. It was quite natural, then, for romantic writers to create a new kind of physical and mental landscape where they could introduce fresh images in a symbolic geography. In this regard, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, according to romantic theorists, is of special significance because it offers a paradigm of the romantic circular journey. According to Northrop Frye's earliest theory, this archetypal model is based on a Christian prototype of a "gigantic cyclical myth, outlined in the Bible, which begins with the fall of man, is followed by a symbolic vision of human history, under the names of Adam and Israel, and ends with the redemption of Adam and Israel by Christ." Frye (1968) speculates that when "translated into Romantic terms, this myth assumes a quite different shape. What corresponds to the older myth of an unfallen state, or lost paradise of Eden, is now a sense of an original identity between individual man and nature which has been lost (17)." The romantic poet wished to reestablish this vital, sensuous connection by inducing fresh perception; consequently, the great romantic theme which emerges from this mythic sense of loss is a yearning for an "expanded consciousness [which brings about] the sense of identity with God and nature" (37). The circular journey, with its continual evocation of images and visionary moments, is the perfect vehicle for such expression.

M. H. Abrams further suggests that the romantic journey is a descendant of a biblical prototype such as the story of the prodigal son, in which the post-Adamic wanderer leaves his native land to journey through an alien land in quest of another, better land (*Natural Supernaturalism* 165). Though *The Prelude* is a good illustration of Abrams's model of the circuitous journey, when he extends his formula to the bulk of romantic poetry, including that of Coleridge, the paradigm is less appropriate. Other models have been proposed which more closely correspond to the symbolist voyage of disorientation. Bernard Blackstone in *The Lost Travellers* has distinguished between essentially circular Christian journeys and secularized versions
that are more linear and move from “slum to garden” (10). Yet both of these journeys are teleological in that the wanderer reaches a goal which is an improvement of his initial, divided state. In a more comprehensive study, Roppen and Sommer argue that there are both teleological and nonteleological journeys that are respectively circular and linear. The first kind of journey, like that of *The Odyssey*, is controlled by a “circular progression toward renewal or restoration of the traveller-hero,” while the second, similar to that of *The Aeneid*, is characterized by a “linear progression of the hero from a state of social or intellectual disorder toward one of order” (75). I propose a third kind of journey more basic to the symbolist tradition, a journey in which the wanderer or exile, despite what may appear to be a circular path, is never reborn, rejuvenated, or reintegrated into the society he has left. Neither is the journey an affirmative quest for self-knowledge since the awareness gained brings suffering and despair, usually unmitigated in the text itself. While the journeyer may experience what Praz has described as a characteristically romantic vacillation between hope and despair or joy and dejection, such vicissitudes do not give way to an affirmation of life, in the form of social reintegration, as some romantic theories hold. The traveler enters what may be termed a heretical space whose chaos is characterized by a radical disorientation of the senses. The journeyer becomes permanently disoriented on a sensuous, psychological, and cultural level, so much so that the archetypal Christian return to a state of grace is either impossible or refused.

Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is a controversial but paradigmatic example of such a heretical journey. The Mariner clearly travels a circular path, returning to his “native country,” and experiences an archetypal death and rebirth within an explicitly Christian context. And yet there is ample evidence of disorientation and estrangement in the Mariner’s experience and in the tenuous sense of closure offered by the moral of the poem.

The first stanzas of Coleridge’s ballad are an exploration of the relationship between cultural symbology and individual per-
ception. Of all social rituals, marriage is among those most clearly associated with the ratification and continuance of culture. A celebration of the union of two individuals, the marriage feast initiates a family into society and therefore extends as well as sanctifies the culture. The Mariner, who stands apart from this cultural, Christian celebration, is initially dismissed by the wedding guest as a “grey-beard loon” [11], until the “glittering eye” of the Mariner holds him spellbound. The initial situation of the poem thus implies a tension between the comfortable embracing of cultural values and the undeniable attraction of the visionary outcast who has gained an extraordinary knowledge that transcends and thereby implicitly challenges cultural perceptions. His power is compelling. Even though the wedding guest is “next of kin” to the wedding couple, “he cannot choose but hear” the story of the Mariner.

The poem continues to explore the relation between culture and perception as the Mariner begins his tale:

The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top.

[21-24]

After the townspeople cheer the Mariner’s vessel in a communal sendoff, the emblems of the cultural order disappear as the ship sails below the horizon. Coleridge’s mode of description is important, for the church and lighthouse, as obvious symbols of order and light, are not perceived as growing distant and gradually vanishing; rather, they drop out of sight abruptly as the poetic landscape switches to the heretical seascape described by the Mariner. The shift in perceptual mode as the ship drops below the church, below the hill, and below the lighthouse coincides with the beginning of the disorienting voyage.

Little need be added to Bodkin’s classic discussion of the significance of descent with respect to the archetype of death and rebirth. But it bears mention here because the disorienting symbolist voyage alternately adheres to and subverts traditional
archetypal patterns that have been conventionalized in the Christian mythos. This vacillation between a passive adoption of cultural archetypes and the poet’s active mythopoeic creation is discernible in “The Ancient Mariner,” particularly in the mythic threshold the Mariner crosses and the unconventional seascape in which he subsequently travels. As the Mariner sails across the archetypal line, or equator, the symbolic geography of the poem reflects an immediate and pronounced transformation in the epistemology of the narrative, anticipated by the unusual description of the vanishing townscape. That change in epistemology, in the nature of what the Mariner sees and understands, marks a radical sensate disorientation that coincides with his departure from his native country and entry into a new seascape. Beyond the shadow-line, cultural knowledge is useless as a means of interpreting the phenomena the Mariner encounters:

And now there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold:
The ice, mast-high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.

And through the drifts the snowy cliffs
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—
The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!

At length did cross an Albatross.
Through the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God’s name.

In these four ballad stanzas, Coleridge introduces many of the salient characteristics of the disorienting voyage that expresses the modern heretical episteme, a world view at once part of and
distinct from the gnostic traditions of Christian heresy which emphasize gnosis or self-knowledge gained through individual revelation (Grant 6–13) rather than belief through sacred scripture. The Mariner, like his heretical predecessors, depends less on any established cultural or religious symbol than on an individual, sensual manifestation of divinity; he derives knowledge from his individual percipience through his heightened visionary senses. Such heightened perceptions are initially evident in the Mariner’s hyperesthetic sensations, his emphasis on the “wondrous cold” and his equal but opposite sensitivity to heat: “All in a hot and copper sky, / The bloody Sun” [111–12] beat down on the Mariner and crew “with broad and burning face” [180] so that “every tongue, through utter drought, / Was withered at the root” [135–36].

Though it is biographically uncertain whether Coleridge composed these verses after he had become addicted to opium or whether they were in fact composed, as Lowes argues, predominantly from secondary sources and the modifying colors of imagination,⁹ it is clear that the hypersensitivity of the tactile sense is akin to that of the opium addict (Hayter 44). This is an important point, for the convention of the disorienting voyage of modern symbolist literature has for its precedent not only heretical mysticism but also the drug-induced sensate disorientation of writers like Coleridge and De Quincey.¹⁰ This visual and tactile sensitivity in part produces the synesthetic interplay of sense qualities that, like his hyperesthesia, defines the extraordinary nature of the Mariner’s experience. The emerald-green ice floats by “mast-high,” a visual and kinesthetic combination which suggests an icy, emerald ship sailing in an otherworldly seascape.

In such totally unfamiliar surroundings, defined by senses that are supersensitive, synesthetically correspondent, or confused, the Mariner and crew see neither “shapes of men nor beasts [they] ken.” And yet, before the Mariner’s eyes, the phenomenal world comes alive: “It cracked and growled, and roared and howled, / Like noises in a swound!” Such animism is a typical component of the journey into heretical space. The
Mariner's seascape is a confusion of cold and hot, water and thirst, life and death, all of which is animated and ordered by the mythopoetic imagination of the poet-narrator, and reanimated and retold by the Mariner. Such mythopoetic animism necessarily challenges the cultural sense of reality. Disavowing or withdrawing from the Christian universe, the visionary heretic creates a new landscape out of the chaos of the senses. As the Mariner disjoins the cultural episteme by entering a landscape where all is uncharted, he becomes entirely disoriented; he can depend on no predetermined reality, nothing known before. Hence, the sensate derangement experienced by the Mariner (the "noises in a swound") indicates a simultaneous epistemological and cultural disorientation. His swoon marks another threshold of consciousness in which his imaginative voyage is the only universe that exists.

These sensate derangements give way to the near cessation of all sense stimuli during the Mariner's anesthetic life-in-death that occurs later in the narrative. Again, little need be added to Bodkin's discussion of the archetypal significance of this section of the poem except that the spectres and demons which dominate Parts 3—4 anticipate the spectral persecution that is common in the heretical works of literature examined in the present study. Such spectres and ghosts stand in opposition to those of orthodox Christian symbology. Most obviously, the use of the symbol of the albatross, to represent either the Christian soul or Christ himself, is an idiosyncratic and therefore iconoclastic subversion of Christian symbolism. Even to this day, the image of an albatross around one's neck carries no specifically religious connotation but is rather an emblem of the guilt-ridden pariah who is interested less in crimes against God than in crimes punishable by the self. It is thus the mythopoetic imagination of the poet which conjures polar spirits, the "Spectre-woman and her Death-mate"; the poet depends little on pre-existing symbols, myths, or cultural archetypes.

In keeping with the convention of the dream vision and the Christian paradigm of descent and return, however, the Mariner begins an archetypal return after blessing the water snakes.
The marginal gloss at line 378 again locates the Mariner at the “Line,” which, when crossed, induces another swoon [392] that serves as a return threshold. Coleridge has thus created a roughly symmetrical structure through the formal repetition of images or narrative events:

Meeting with wedding guest [1–20]
  Communal cheering of ship in native country [21]
  Ship reaches the line [30]
  Hyperesthesia, sense disorientation, swoon [50–62]
    Destruction of Christian soul
    Life-in-death
  Spectral persecution
  Vision of angelic spirits [350–72]
  Recrossing the line, swoon [380–92]
  Hermit cheers ship returned to native country [528]
Frame meeting with wedding guest [580–625]

There seems little reason to doubt, given this formal pattern, that Coleridge intended to portray an archetypal death and rebirth within a specifically Christian framework. Simply stated, the Mariner commits an inexplicable transgression, saves his soul by blessing God’s creatures, and remains penitent for his sin. Yet there are a number of ways in which “The Ancient Mariner” departs from the paradigm of the romantic circular journey.

First, the symmetry of events in the structure of the journey is undercut by a powerful formal disorientation that is characteristic of the symbolist voyage. That formal disorientation, extending beyond the imagistic disorientation of hyperesthesia or synesthesia, becomes a kind of disorganizing principle reflected in linguistic or structural disorientation. In “The Ancient Mariner,” linguistic and structural disjunctions are created by the simultaneous presentation of poetry and marginal glosses. Though Coleridge published the glosses some twenty years after the original composition of the work (1797, 1817), the poem is well known for its two coincidental texts. The presence of two
parallel texts disorients the reader, particularly the first-time reader, whose attention is divided between them. Morse Peckham has identified this disorganizing concept as central to all romantic poetry which, he claims, was a reaction against the "epistemological inadequacy" of the eighteenth century:

Tension between subject and object was the truth of the matter, they were convinced, and hence the task of the artist was to create a perceptual field to which psychological adaptation was anything but easy, a field which would permit and require and force the artistic observer to experience perceptual and cognitive disorientation and in grasping that field to engage the power of the creative imagination. (21)

Even though Coleridge and his critics have generally thought of "The Ancient Mariner" as poetic text with an incidental gloss, the coincidental texts exert mutual influence on each other and create the perceptual and cognitive disorientation of which Peckham speaks. On its most basic level this disorientation occurs in the disruption of the physical process of reading; the eye is forced to move from right to left as well as left to right, and up as well as down on the page. The result is a linguistic subversion, in which the reader's attention is divided between competing narratives. When the reader makes a leap between texts, he or she effectively crosses the shadow-line that Coleridge refers to in the *Biographia*, for the two narratives are not of the same order of reality.11 The prose gloss and poetic text offer two separate mentalities, one a rational, "civilized scholastic voice" (Lipking 614) and the other a superrational, imaginative poetic utterance. In a sense, then, the poem expresses two competing epistemologies, one embodied in a supernatural and heretical poem and the other in an essentially Christian prose gloss explaining what the culturally competent reader might otherwise find incomprehensible or unbelievable in the poem. This epistemological tension thus creates a kind of schizophrenic disorientation in the reading process. As Lipking asserts, the "pious idiom" of the gloss "invests [it] with an aura of unproblematical faith, of certain knowledge" (619), all of
which is simultaneously called into question by the incomprehensible wilderness of the seascape. What results is a “tension between the two ways of construing the mariner’s tale—between experiencing it and interpreting it” (621).

A second important question that I wish to raise pertains to the Mariner’s greeting upon his return. Why is the otherwise perfect circularity of the journey broken when the Mariner is cheered not by the general community but by the Hermit good? Truly, the Hermit is portrayed as a holy man to whom the Mariner turns for penance; yet the Hermit is himself a voluntary exile from society who “loves to talk with Mariners / That come from a far countree” (517–18). The religious observance of human isolation as a mark of holiness is, perhaps inadvertently, called into question by the hellish isolation of the Mariner during his life-in-death experience and by the overall context of a tale told to a wedding guest who is trying to join a celebration feast. Had the Mariner been greeted and cheered by the general public, it would have made a far less interesting poem but one that more clearly fits the symmetrical Christian paradigm of a circular return to grace and order. Instead, the Mariner fails to respond to the cheer offered by a social exile and enters a state of exile much more dreadful than that of the Hermit:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.

[582–90]

Using the story of the wandering Jew, Coleridge invokes the biblical punishment of wandering (Anderson 11–15) and simultaneously admits the appropriateness of secular myth. This in-
vocation of the heretical wanderer, for whom there is no hope of cultural rootedness, marks what may be Coleridge’s inadvertent admission that orthodox faith is not simply triumphant in the case of the Mariner. The Mariner experiences less a sense of reunion with God than a profound sense of knowing he has visited a landscape “so lonely that God himself / Scarce seemed there to be” [599–600]. And the knowledge of his disorienting journey, as well as the guilt he feels for having destroyed a Christian soul, sends him into permanent exile. The Mariner is one condemned to wander forever on the fringe of society, on the periphery of wedding feasts, in order to retell his harrowing, and heretical, story. The conclusion of “The Ancient Mariner” may thus reflect the weakening of faith and the troubling religious skepticism that Coleridge himself felt during the years surrounding the writing of the poem (Barth 1969, 1–13).

Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” thus offers a seminal paradigm defining the relationship between sense perception and the modern heretical vision. In this pattern, the journeyer typically crosses a threshold and enters an animistic realm characterized by a hyperesthetic, synesthetic, or anesthetic derangement of the senses, which is reflected in the unorthodox images, language, or structure of the work. This disorientation of the senses induces an altered awareness of self and subverts the cultural episteme, that a priori sense of what is culturally known or knowable. This altered knowledge renders the journeyer a permanent exile from his or her own culture, without hope of regeneration or return.