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The Never-Ending Tale:
Narrative and Lyric in Coleridge's
"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

by URSULA K. HEISE

Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.
And all is always now.

T. S. Eliot

A ship's crew dies, a vessel sinks; one man survives to tell the tale. Reduced to these its simplest terms, the narrative of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" seems to follow a pattern familiar from many other accounts of sea voyages and death by water. Yet from its first publication in 1798 and in spite of major textual revisions in the following two decades, many critics have considered this sailors' ballad of storms, calms, death, and ghostly apparitions a flawed tale that must needs leave the stamp of imperfection on all its readings. The incoherence of the narrative, the obscure symbolism, a questionable concluding moral, a marginal gloss that raises at least as many questions as it answers, an apparently superfluous introductory "Argument," and a self-contradictory epigraph have given rise to a wealth of ingenious if often conflicting analyses that explore the poem in terms of its religious, moral, philosophical, and psychoanalytical signification. The present reading, following the objective of Shoshana Felman's 1977 interpretation of James's "The Turn of the Screw," attempts not so much to solve or answer the enigmatic question of the text, but to investigate its structure; not so much to name and make explicit the ambiguity of the text, but to understand the necessity and the rhetorical functioning of the textual ambiguity. The question underlying such a reading is thus not "what does the story mean?" but rather "how does the story mean?" (Felman 119)

This kind of analysis provides access to the poem's discourse about itself, its writings and readings, and about the conflict and confluence of the narrative and lyrical impulses originating in its oxymoronic name of "lyrical ballad."

Coleridge himself, by assimilating the reading process to a journey in his suggestion that the "reader should be carried forward . . . by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself" (Biographia Literaria II:14), invites the critic to read the account of a voyage, a spatial progression from a point of departure to a destination,
in terms of its implications for the textual progression of narrative from beginning to closure. Thus, the introductory stanza of the mariner's tale, "The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared, / Merrily did we drop / Below the kirk, below the hill, / Below the lighthouse top" (ll. 21-24), represents the beginning of a journey as well as of a narrative, both characterized by an initial movement of separation and venturing forth into a different element. As the ship leaves the harbour and familiar milestones of orientation behind, so narrative begins by closing off the text of the world in order to create in linguistic space the world of its own text.

The implications of this motif of primal separation become clear from Peter Brooks's analysis of "Freud's Masterplot," an essay that develops a model of narrative progression on the basis of Freud's metapsychological treatise, Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Brooks investigates, after Freud, what hidden patterns structure human life so as to make it narratable, to turn it from an arbitrary, meaningless sequence of events into meaningful plot. He proposes that the need for a sense of plot, may ultimately lie in the desire to recuperate pure successivity, passing time: a search, not so much for the redemption from time, but redemption of time as the possible medium of significance. This may already suggest the predominant importance of the end as that moment which illuminates, and casts retrospective meaning on the middle, and indeed defines the beginning as a certain desire tending toward the end. ("Repetition" 504)

This desire, according to Freud, is also the propelling force of the human psyche. Existing originally in a state of quiescence in and with the mother, the child's psyche undergoes a traumatic severance from the maternal body and mind, an experience which it represses yet keeps inflicting upon itself—contrary to the pleasure principle—in a series of unconscious repetitions designed to turn it from the passive victim into the active master of the ordeal. In this way the psyche attempts to reestablish its initial condition of immediate and total gratification, of complete fulfillment of the pleasure principle. Desire can therefore be defined as "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (quoted in Brooks, "Masterplot" 290), which leads Freud to declare that "the aim of all life is death" (ibid.).

The psyche's struggle toward a totalizing moment of static fulfillment, similar to yet not identical with its initial state, serves Brooks as a model for narrative which, in order to be meaningful, must strive toward its ending. Its closural drive, however, is counteracted by the necessity to postpone the end through a series of repetitions and variations which constitute the textual middle: the immediate attainment of the ending would be as meaningless as interminable continuation. Narrative therefore originates in a strife between "life instinct" and "death wish," between the drive toward closure and the necessity of delay (Brooks, "Repetition" 512). This is why
the beginning in fact presupposes the end. The very possibility of meaning plotted through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending. . . . We read the incidents of narration as "promises and annunciations" of final coherence, (Brooks, "Masterplot" 283)

or, as T. S. Eliot phrases it in *Four Quartets*, "in my beginning is my end" (23). Consequently, the textual middle, narrative progression, can be defined "as détour, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text" (Brooks, "Masterplot" 295).

As a narrator who attempts to tell the wedding-guest his life’s story, the ancient mariner is confronted with precisely this necessity of working his way to a meaningful ending through a series of narrative postponements. His journey around the world unfolds in alternating stages of forward movement (typically associated with storms, winds, or the agency of spirits) and static immobility (related to death or life-threatening dangers). No sooner has the ship reached the equatorial "Line"—geographical and textual middle, latitude and line on the page that guides the writing—than it is seized by a violent storm that carries it southward until the vessel gets caught in the ice of the south polar regions, a blank, lifeless landscape where "Nor shape of men nor beasts we ken" (I. 57). In this unknown and unnameable environment all utterance is reduced to the growling, roaring, and howling of the ice, similar to "noises in a swound" (II. 61–62), and narrative would perish along with the sailors if it were not for the arrival of the albatross, a familiar appearance that can be "hailed . . . in God’s name" as if it were "a Christian soul" (II. 66, 65). The bird’s presence causes the ice to break and a strong wind to rise, which drives the vessel far northward into the Pacific Ocean. But when the narrator himself kills the albatross, the ship is soon immobilized again in a lasting equatorial calm, and it is not until all of the crew except the mariner have died that a demonic spirit begins to move it from underneath the water. He carries it in an unclear course across the ocean and once more to the equator, where angelic spirits and later a genial wind take it over and drive it back to the home port. At the end of the voyage the temporarily reanimated bodies of the sailors drop dead a second time, the ship sinks, and the mariner barely escapes being drowned along with it.

Thus the journey completes itself in three successive stages, each phase set off from the next by an instance of death: the killing of the albatross, the death of the ship’s crew, the sinking of the vessel. Throughout the tale, death therefore operates as a narrative hinge that closes off one phase of progression and introduces the next. Its double function as narrative period and colon is strikingly revealed by the fatal incidents amid the icebergs of the Antarctic. Although the ice brings the ship’s rapid southward progression to a sudden standstill, encloses it from all sides, and threatens the crew with premature death, the immobilized vessel also attracts the albatross, in the poem’s symbolism a bird of good omen that
causes the ice to give way. When the mariner arbitrarily murders the bird, the ship is caught in another prolonged phase of static immobility—but not before it has been driven in a precipitate voyage from the South Pole to the equator: death halts and hastens.

This also holds true for language itself as theme and medium of the mariner's tale, since each instance of death is accompanied by a breakdown of communication and threatening silence. Thus, when the mariner shoots the albatross, he not only attacks a harmless animal but also severs a communal relationship that has been initiated “in God's name” (l. 66) and pursued to the point of linguistic ritual. The bird has learned to answer the sailors' call “And every day, for food or play, / [Comes] to the mariners' hollo!” (ll. 73-74). Only by abusing this domestication through language can the mariner slay him—an act which therefore becomes a threat to language as a carrier of meaning itself. The other sailors perpetuate the confusion by alternately calling the albatross a bird of good fortune “That made the breeze to blow” (l. 96) and a symbol of bad luck “That brought the fog and mist” (l. 100). Such arbitrarily shifting associations of signifiers and signifieds cannot but undermine the normal functioning of language.

Consequently, silence spreads as the narrative progresses. Breaking free of the polar ice, the ship sails “Into that silent sea” (l. 106), and soon calm and drought overtake the crew and parch their throats and lips to the point where speech becomes impossible. The sailors make some desperate attempts to assert themselves against the ever-growing silence (“And we did speak only to break / The silence of the sea!” [ll. 109-10]), but ultimately their own voices dry up: “And every tongue, through utter drought, / Was withered at the root; / We could not speak, no more than if / We had been choked with soot” (ll. 135-38). Language dies as the silence within joins the silence without.

Only once is this silence broken. The mariner bites his own arm and moistens his lips with blood to announce the arrival of a supposedly lifesaving ship: “I bit my arm, I sucked the blood, / And cried, A sail! A sail!” (ll. 160-61). But ironically, all that speech purchased at the expense of life blood can utter is the oncoming of definitive silence. Not a human but Death's own vessel comes to meet the lingering ship, whereupon all the sailors except the mariner die, falling into silence “Too quick for groan or sigh” (l. 213).

As it spreads within the tale, silence also affects the syntax of the narrative as such. First the linearity of fully developed sentences lapses into the circular repetition of identical syntagms, such as “Day after day, day after day, / We stuck, nor breath nor motion” (ll. 115-16) or “Water, water, every where, / And all the boards did shrink; / Water, water, every

1. Duff makes a similar point: “The bird which has come to respond to hails and 'hollos' is destroyed by an act which denies the agency responsible for speech and social union” (27).
where" (ll. 119-21). Later even those break down and leave the textual discourse stammering the same paradigmatic items over and over again: “Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea!” (ll. 232-33). If narrative can be syntactically envisioned as “the articulation of a set of verbs” (Brooks, “Masterplot” 299), then this verbless fragment constitutes its very antithesis, the disintegration of the tale into a mere trace of text.

Yet precisely this lapse into silence in and of the tale opens up a new kind of discourse. The mariner reports that when his shipmates died “Too quick for groan or sigh, / Each turned his face with ghastly pang, / And cursed [him] with his eye” (ll. 212-15). Too close to death to utter speech, the dying sailors communicate with the ancient mariner through the eye, through a gaze that goes blank in the act of looking. What comes into being here is a discourse out of absence that speaks through the disembodied gaze, originating in and surviving the death of the one who looks: “The look with which they looked on me / Had never passed away,” the mariner affirms long after his shipmates’ end (ll. 255-56). Such a gaze can communicate nothing other than what it is—the transition from life to death, from language to silence—and to live forever in this liminal state is exactly the curse it inflicts upon the ancient mariner. The “curse in a dead man’s eye” (l. 260) becomes a “spell” (l. 442), a magic, enigmatic formula that needs to be spelled out and acted out, a hieroglyph that asks to be deciphered. “The dying man,” G. Stewart says, “... is becoming to those near him not a man any longer, and not yet a corpse, but in the luminous transition a character” (Death Sentences 45): character in the double sense of fictional figure and written sign to be read. As the mariner proceeds to relate the consequences of the fatal curse, his tale therefore turns into the story of a reading that spells out the implications of the mysterious dying gaze. Indeed, it not only recounts a reading (ad)venture, it is the reading, since the very telling of the story is prompted by the unexpired curse: the text reads itself through its telling (or writing).

As a consequence, the mariner’s role within the narrative changes significantly. During a major part of the death-stricken vessel’s journey back to its home port, the narrator is functionally absent, being either asleep or in trance (cf. ll. 295, 392). His ability to operate as a mediating voice vanishes to the point where his tale turns temporarily into unmediated dramatic dialogue: two spectral voices speak to each other in the air (ll. 398-429). The purpose of this seemingly unmotivated dialogue is none other than to give an editorial comment on the plot. It sums up previous events (“Is this the man?” [l. 398], etc.), announces future developments (“And penance more will do” [l. 409]), and explains in what way the narrative is presently advancing (“What makes the ship drive on so fast?” [l. 412]). Thus, in the absence of the narrator’s voice, the dramatic dialogue elevates narration to meta-narrative discourse—a structural re-duplication rather than progression.

The same transformation occurs in the plot itself. Both the ship’s
itinerary and the general sequence of events become increasingly difficult to trace during the last part of the journey. On the equator, the Polar Spirit takes the vessel over and carries it along for an unspecified distance and period of time, until suddenly the reader is told that it has reached the equator again (l. 384)—whether in the Atlantic or the Pacific Ocean remains unclear. The only location that can be identified with any degree of precision after this is the ship’s home port, which it reaches through the agency of demons, angels, strange winds, and maybe the air itself (cf. ll. 424–25). The incidents that occur during this part of the journey are no less enigmatic than the itinerary itself. Rather than from any law of cause and effect, they too proceed from a principle of reduplication: twice the ship finds itself on the equator, twice the sailors drop dead, twice the mariner sees the curse in their eyes, twice the spell is (partially) broken, twice the old sailor perceives strange winds that never come to move the ship; instead, a spirit drives it on from underneath, other spirits are heard speaking in the air, and others again come to “resurrect” the dead sailors’ bodies—an event, moreover, which seems quite unnecessary to the plot because the resurrected never address a single word to the mariner and are useless for the manipulation of the ship, which is long past human control.

Yet the multiplication is not meaningless. For the duplicated incidents frame a unique occurrence which constitutes the climax and focal point of the mariner’s entire tale and justifies the resurrection of the dead sailors. Passed away but temporarily reanimated, neither speaking nor moving their eyes, acting under the impulse of a force alien to their lifeless bodies, these “inspired” seafarers gather at sunrise around the ship’s mast and intone an Orphic song that encompasses all harmonies imaginable to the human ear and makes even objects join its melody (ll. 352–78):

Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths,
And from their bodies passed.

Around, around, flew each sweet sound,
Then darted to the Sun;
Slowly the sounds came back again,
Now mixed, now one by one.

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the sky-lark sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seemed to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning!

And now ‘twas like all instruments,
Now like a lonely flute;
And now it is an angel’s song,
That makes the heavens be mute.

It ceased; yet still the sails made on
A pleasant noise till noon,
A noise like of a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.

This song, elevating itself from "inspir(it)ed" corpses between death and death, articulates all that is sounding, chanting, and speaking in language, music, and nature, all that conveys in itself an undivided, totalizing, and ultimately inexpressible meaning. As such, it is a kind of absolute language in which signifier and signified melt harmoniously into each other—an incarnation of the very aspirations of lyrical poetry. What we find at the core of the mariner's narrative deflected into ascending incantation, then, is the lyrical in its purest essence, which is typically associated with verticality (the dead stand assembled around the mast, and at sunrise their song elevates itself into the sky). As Roland Barthes puts it,

the Word in Poetry can never be untrue, because it is a whole; it shines with an infinite freedom and prepares to radiate toward innumerable uncertain and possible connections. Fixed connections being abolished, the word is left only with a vertical project, it is like a monolith, or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes, and recollections: it is a sign which stands. (Sontag 57-58)

Not only does this verticality focus the ship's aimless circular wanderings on the water, it also redeems the dead ends of linear narrative. The corpses' song that "darts to the Sun" counterbalances the curse of the bodies dropping dead and the mortal dart shot at the albatross. The disintegration of narrative language is overcome by the poetic reunion of signifier and signified, which resolves the forward thrust of plot into pure elevation.

However, this ideal lyrical core remains, from the narrator's point of view, a perfection beyond access. He is left outside his former shipmates' spectral song as a listener unable to participate, and merely watches from afar the miraculous departure of the seraphs from the sailors' bodies: "Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat," he reports (l. 488), and "A man all light, a seraph-man, / On every corse there stood" (l. 490-91). These luminous figures stand "as signals to the land" (l. 494), as Barthian incarnations of the poetic Word that lead the mariner to exclaim: "No voice did they impart— / No voice; but oh! the silence sank / Like music on my heart" (l. 497-99). Living symbols of the force that transforms even death's silence into music and poetry, the seraphs reveal to the mariner through the corpses they stand on the price of such ultimate fulfillment: life itself. Only beyond the threshold of death is definitive meaning (of life, of narrative) to be found.

Yet death is precisely what is denied to the mariner in the final scene of the narrative. As the pilot's boat, called on by the seraphic light signals, approaches to guide the vessel to its mooring place, the ship gives off a rumbling sound and sinks so fast that the mariner barely escapes drown-
The narrative journey at its closure almost takes the narrator along into obliteration, so that “Like one that hath been seven days drowned / [His] body lay afloat” (ll. 552–53). Drowning, according to Stewart, is a death pattern with particularly strong meta-narrative implications because of the popular belief that the drowning mind, having nowhere to look but back, abridges its existence in a single instant of vision too swift for utterance, though not, of course, for narrative phrasing. (Death Sentences 32)

A moment “swift as dreams” (l. 554) lived through in the danger of imminent suffocation thus becomes an analogue “of narrative itself as a word-ing into shape of lives passed into completion, lapsed to report” (Stewart 33). But the mariner’s life is not allowed to assume its definitive shape through death by water; the pilot comes to rescue him. If the narratee must die to give the story of his life its final meaning, the narrator must live to tell it: this is the dilemma every autobiographical account faces in its precarious spinning around the vortex of life’s last moment—in both senses of the word.

The pilot’s boat escapes from the whirlpool of the shipwreck; the mariner is saved. Rejected at the thresholds of death, he must seek to end in some other fashion a life that languishes under its curse of silence. Desperately he implores the hermit to shrive him. But instead of granting absolution, the hermit reverses his request and asks the mariner to speak and declare his identity first: “‘Say quick,’ quoth he, ‘I bid thee say— / What manner of man art thou?’” (ll. 576–77)—the very question that turns the ancient mariner into the narrator of his own life. “Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched / With a woful agony, / Which forced me to begin my tale; / And then it left me free” (ll. 578–81): in a spasm of language, narrative turns back upon itself. Instead of the expected ending, we find the tale told over again from the beginning—another beginning that originates in deadly agony. Closure is replaced by disclosure: “In my end is my beginning,” as T. S. Eliot phrases it (Four Quartets 32).

Moreover, this repetition turns out to be a virtually endless process. After the tale lets the mariner free, there is nowhere any indication that the hermit actually does absolve him. The curse, transformed through the mariner’s figurative death from a spell of silence into a spell of language, urges him on:

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;

2. This reversal is noted in Davidson, who also draws attention to the fact that “the ‘woeful agony’ regularly returns to require another recounting of the same story of sin” (88), so that ultimately the mariner is “reduced to an embodiment of his periodically repeated tale” (ibid.).
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach. (ll. 582-90)

The tale that cannot reach its own ending has nowhere to turn but back upon itself, again and again. The telling of the tale thus reenacts what the tale itself tells: life that constantly encounters death and yet can never die. As narrative is propelled on by moments of stasis, so the mariner’s life is driven on by the repeated experience of his own death in narrative. As narrative delays its ending by detour, the narrator’s end is delayed by narrative. Narrative is the narrator’s life (or life-in-death); the narrator is his tale.

Paradoxically, though, the repeated tale of death that becomes the narrator’s life is simultaneously his attempt to reach that very death. For a repetition compulsion, Brooks explains (after Freud), is the effort to perform a “movement from passivity to mastery” (“Masterplot” 286). By reiterating compulsively a story about the infliction of death upon him, the mariner tries to become master of his own death—in other words, to commit suicide. It is an attempt to kill the self by telling its death, because the “I” can only find itself in its annihilation. Yet this endeavor is doomed to failure since language, by its very nature displacing meaning along a chain of signifiers rather than defining it conclusively at any particular point, cannot contain the self. That is why

it is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but me: since language is something I am made out of, rather than merely a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction. (Eagleton 130)

Through the deflected end of tale-telling, we thus find ourselves caught once again in a circular movement around an inaccessible center: the self. Fully present only in language and yet inexorably absent from it, the self cannot be attained until the moment of its loss, in death. Death can only be reached by telling life’s tale to the end, but the tale itself resists being told to the end because the end is that which is in itself untellable. Therefore, in the absence of a totalizing language that can contain it, the self must forever remain external to itself.

This simultaneous affirmation and denial of meaning explains not only the uncanniness of a “ghastly tale” that is haunted by the ghost of its own ending but also the ghostliness of a narrator whose life is the long-dilated dying process of a self displaced into a death it cannot find. When the wedding-guest interrupts the mariner’s narration, it is to question this eerie existence of a storyteller whose tale turns him into its own ghost in the process of being told:

“I fear thee, ancient Mariner!
I fear thy skinny hand!”
And thou art long, and lank, and brown,
As is the ribbed sea-sand.

I fear thee and thy glittering eye,
and thy skinny hand, so brown.”—(ll. 224–29)

And of course the wedding-guest's doubts about the nature of his strange interlocutor are justified. The mariner himself associates “glittering eyes” with his dead shipmates (ll. 436–37), and his “brown hand” reminds us of the moment he sucked blood from his arm so as to be able to speak. As a narrator who can only assert his presence by means of a tale that affirms his absence, the mariner exemplifies the prototypical “author from the dead” (cf. Stewart 41).

The last two lines of the quoted stanza raise this question of authorship to yet another level. In the 1817 edition of “The Rime,” Coleridge added to these lines the following footnote:

For the last two lines of this stanza, I am indebted to Mr. Wordsworth. It was on a delightful walk . . . with him and his sister, . . . that this Poem was planned, and in part composed.

With the addition of this footnote, the wedding-guest’s doubts about the mariner become a mise en abyme of the difficulties that arise when an author tries to communicate with a reader through a written text, from which he must by the very nature of writing be absent. The problems of self-recognition through language are transposed to the level of recognition of the Other in and through writing and reading.

This is true not only for the isolated case of the footnote, but for the literary system of communication set up by “The Rime” as a whole. The entire text is structured as a series of mises en abyme, of superimposed narrative frameworks that establish a chain of readings and retellings or rewritings of an original tale which is lost in elision.

This loss is realized even in the innermost network of communication in the text, the dialogue between the mariner and the wedding-guest. The story that the latter listens to is by no means the original one. Rather, it is an account of how the original tale—the tale told to the hermit after the shipwreck, and to scores of others thereafter—came to be told. The wedding-guest in fact never hears what the hermit heard (and neither does any of the subsequent listeners or readers); what he listens to is a repetition of that original story, one of the mariner’s countless versions told many years after the event.

That this repetition is also a reading of the original tale becomes abundantly clear from the moral the mariner attaches to it, a moral that is directly geared toward the wedding-guest’s situation and that was not part of the tale addressed to the hermit.

O sweeter than the marriage-feast
’Tis sweeter far to me,
To walk together to the kirk . . .

............................
And all together pray,
While each to his great Father bends ... 
..............................................
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small . . . (ll. 601-15)

This moral reflects the mariner's desperate search for an adequate ending to his incomplete tale; and indeed such a closing maxim would, at least in the case of the wedding-guest, confer meaning on the narrative. But the facts do not bear it out. The communion with the great Father is obviously for the mariner himself a projected rather than an attained ending. Old, half-crazed, haunted by a repetition compulsion that lets him neither live nor die, he has not yet been able to obtain the remission of his sin and the end of his penance. Consequently, the joint walk to the church remains a mere theoretical possibility. At the end of the poem, the mariner is as isolated as he was in the beginning.3

The mariner's own account of the original tale and its meaning is embedded in another framework, that of an unidentified narrator who tells us about the encounter of the old sailor and the wedding-guest. The description of this framing incident removes us one more step from the Ur-tale by involving us in an intricate interplay of story and discourse, narration and meta-narration. What we are being told is that the wedding-guest's preliminary objections put off the beginning of the mariner's tale—at the same time that our readerly beginning of this tale is postponed by the account of the preliminaries. But not only does the wedding-guest interfere with the mariner's narrated journey, the latter also delays the wedding-guest's real one: the sailor will not let him cross the threshold to the bridegroom's house before he has heard the story. Indeed, even after the mariner's tale is over, the guest turns away from the wedding celebration. After what the story has implicitly told him about the inaccessibility of undivided language, he can have no part in a marriage ceremony, prime example of a performative speech act in which an instance of speech becomes identical with an act performed. (A ritual formula such as "I pronounce you man and wife" does not point to any act of wedding outside itself, it is the wedding—of signified and signifier as well as otherwise.4) The narrative framework thus sets up an intricate self-contradiction; it claims that the total coincidence of speech and act is unattainable but at the same time enacts what it talks about—by talking about it: postponement. In a sense, though, this self-contradiction would seem to confirm that speech and act do not coincide. Story and discourse collapse into each other and yet remain at variance: the very narrative structure of the text acts out the simultaneous assertion and denial of meaning inherent in language itself.

3. Cf. on this subject Davidson (92) and Grow (passim).
Yet the reader of the final version is not only confronted with an elided Ur-tale as retold by the mariner as retold by the unknown narrator. The poem he reads additionally includes a marginal gloss by a fictive editor interpolated between the reader and the framed narrative. One of the major functions this gloss performs is the establishment of logical cause-and-effect connections between events, such as its explanations of how the crew members make themselves accomplices to the mariner’s crime, how the calm the ship gets caught in is part of the revenge for the albatross’s death, how the seraphs are “sent down by the invocation of the guardian saint” (gloss to ll. 345–50), and how the mariner’s ultimate penance is the result of a complicated agreement between angelic and demonic forces. Some of the comments clarify ambiguities that the text itself leaves unresolved. When Life-in-Death exclaims in Part III, “‘The game is done! I’ve won! I’ve won!’” (l. 197), the reader is not informed of what she has won. Only the gloss tells him that it is the Ancient Mariner. Even more pointedly, the gloss sometimes answers questions that the text asks and leaves temporarily open. So, when the mariner wonders, “‘... is this indeed / The light-house top I see? / . . . Is this mine own countree?’” (ll. 464–67), the gloss readily affirms, “And the ancient mariner beholdeth his native country.” Relating, rectifying, and responding, the gloss acts indeed as another reading of the mariner’s tale, not unlike the exegetic annotations to sacred scriptures that domesticate the wild uncanniness of revealed transcendence into the orderly structures of theological discourse. More than a gloss, it is a “glossal stop” to the narrative’s open-ended ambiguities—yet a stop which, as a prototype of interpretation, parents all subsequent readings of the text (Arac 268).

The fictive editor’s annotations “stop” the main text in yet another sense. “The gloss tells the incident better because it gives a closer connection between events,” McElderry states (89). It is true that major parts of the gloss can be interpreted as an attempt to mend what is apparently felt to be the text’s main inadequacy: the lack of a proper ending. Almost all of the annotations restructure the incoherences of the poem so as to make them a series of “promises and annunciations” that lead up to the mariner’s final moralizing comment about prayer. Since this ending, as we have seen, constitutes a mere pseudo-closure, the gloss represents a misreading (rather than a reading) of the text. It “short-circuits” the tale, enforcing an improper ending, and therefore functions as a kind of subplot to the reading venture described in the narrative itself. By realizing the “wrong ending,” Brooks affirms, the “subplot stands as one means of warding off the danger of short-circuit, assuring that the main plot will continue through to the right end” (“Masterplot” 292). Thus we find that the “repetition compulsion” which haunts the mariner and his tale also

5. The following summary is based on McElderry’s analysis of the gloss (“Coleridge’s Revisions”).
6. On this dual function of the marginal gloss in general cf. Lipking, particularly sections 1 and 2 (609–21).
contaminates the readings of the text, compelling them to participate in and repeat the plot rather than merely to interpret it.  

Tale, narrative frame, and gloss are in turn preceded by the "Argument," which, in its own way, also reads and retells the text. "In its brief generality, it is hardly more than an expanded title," McElderry comments (87). Giving a title, giving a name, identifying the text is precisely what the Argument does—what every reading does. But in what way does the Argument identify the text? 

How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Marinere came back to his own Country.

The Argument divides the plot into four major parts and sets them off from each other by semicolons. The end of each part coincides with one of the instances of death that were analyzed earlier as structuring hinges of the narrative. Death's silence here literally punctuates (or punctures) the text. Furthermore, the entire summary is a grammatical fragment; both subject and main verb are missing. If narrative is indeed "the articulation of a set of verbs," this means that the Argument, supposedly a summary of the plot, in reality leaves the main plot out. The propelling force of the text is elided—and with good reason. As we have seen, it is always a moment of silence and deadly stasis that ultimately carries the narrative onward. The verb of the tale's syntax is a blank. Even if the title, "Argument," were to be considered the subject of the fragmentary sentence, the chasm of the missing verb between subject and object would remain. The text cannot recognize or read itself completely, and neither can the reader conclusively decipher a text that recedes further and further into layer upon layer of previous readings.

The epigraph that precedes our reading of the "Argument" does not in the same way pretend to be a retelling of the text. Rather, it is an oblique comment on the reading process itself. The epigraph, an excerpt from Thomas Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae,* affirms the existence of multiple invisible beings in the universe, but entangles itself in violent contradictions as soon as it attempts to make any statements about their nature, so that an assertion of belief dissolves into a discourse on the lack of information, while an assertion of the necessity of belief even from limited information dwindles into the necessity of accepting limitations. (Ferguson, "Deluded Reader" 629)

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7. Cf. Arac: "There is no metalanguage for criticism, only repetitions and variations of the poem" (269). This is also one of Felman's major discoveries about "The Turn of the Screw" (cf. particularly sections I-IV of her essay).
8. According to Barthes, this is the purpose of all reading and all narrative: "What is a series of actions? the unfolding of a name, . . . to establish the sequence is to find the name: the sequence is the currency, the exchange value of the name, . . . . This is proairetism: an artifice (or art) of reading that seeks out names" (S/Z 82-83).
On one hand, the reader is encouraged to search for truth, to “distinguish certainty from uncertainty, day from night,” in other words, to decipher the meaning of the universe in an analytical process of setting up binary oppositions. On the other hand, the epigraph claims that it is “ofttimes well pleasing to behold sketched upon the mind, as upon a tablet, a picture of the greater and better world.” This actually describes the reverse synthetic process, in which the reader’s mind becomes a blank page open to the inscription of a transcendent, unified meaning beyond all division and opposition. Yet again, this ideal state remains inaccessible. At the very core of the epigraph (just as in the middle of the text and its various readings) we find the confession that “always the human intellect circles around the knowledge of these mysteries, never touching the centre,” the place where the definitive version of the world’s text lies hidden. The mere outer form of the epigraph, itself another interpolation between the reader and the narrative, confirms the unattainability of such unambiguous meaning. It is printed in italics and written in Latin, two outer marks of foreign-ness, of that which is alien in a text. The use of a different language in particular adumbrates what will be the source of all the reader’s subsequent problems of interpretation: the arbitrary and shifting nature of the connections between signifiers and signifieds forever divided from and external to each other.

As we reach the outer margins of our text, we find ourselves many times removed from what could be considered the “meaning” of the mariner’s tale. Thwarting our ambition to come to a conclusive reading, the text with its multiple layers of readings and retellings forced us away from such closural interpretation into a constantly renewed consideration of how the very problem of recognizing meaning—in language, in the text, the Self, the Other, the world—was worked and reworked at every stage of the text’s successive readings of itself. Yet in this very act of removing us from its signification, the text also guided us closer to it by forcing us to reenact every step of its own endless search for authoritative meaning. This simultaneity of readerly (and writerly) closeness and remoteness is revealed strikingly in the grammar of the poem’s narrative framework, which switches incessantly and arbitrarily back and forth between past and present tense. “It is an ancient Mariner,” “Eftsoons his hand dropt he,” “The Wedding-Guest stood still,” “And listens like a three years’ child” (ll. 1, 12, 14–15; italics mine): we are in the process of discovering events that happened long ago and have been repeated innumerable times since, but at the same time we are witnessing something new and unheard-of. The text we read is old, yet the text does not exist but only our reading of it: this is our reading venture and adventure.

But the juxtaposition of past and present in the narrative frame reveals not only the ambiguity of reading as concurrent loss and reenactment of

9. For my discussion of the epigraph, I am using the translation in Gardner (36).
the text. It also represents the intertwining of two different attitudes toward time in literary form. As we have seen, "narrative meanings are developed in time" (Brooks, "Masterplot" 282), which means that narrative operates in terms of chronological succession toward an ending. Lyrical poetry is not dependent on time in the same sense. It does not pretend to be a repetition or reenactment of time past, but an enactment of time present understood not only as the moment now present but the now-presence of all moments in time, the coincidence of all beginnings and all ends. Whereas narrative analyzes meaning in the chronology of successive moments, lyric poetry synthesizes it in the simultaneity of all possible moments in a time out of time.

Translated into rhetorical terms, narrative can be defined as "the metaphor reached through the chain of metonymies" (Brooks, "Masterplot" 283) because it works its way through successivity toward a final instance of definitive meaning. Poetry, on the other hand, is based not on a final but a central moment of metaphor, around which the text revolves. This is not to say that lyrical poetry does not or cannot have plot. But plot here operates not so much as the progressive accumulation of meaning than as the unfolding of a full meaning that is present at all times from beginning to end and through incessant metamorphoses and reincarnations seeks its perfect articulation—a perfection that it cannot find in a language which by its very nature disperses meaning. It is verticality, transcendence trying forever unsuccessfully to translate itself into horizontality and immanence. Comparable to the spokes of a wheel radiating from and revolving around the nave, the metonymies of the lyrical point to its center and thereby articulate the eternal search for the original language (cf. Ferguson, _Language_ 3), for the Rimbaudian Ur-Word that in an absolute synthesis encompasses all words and meanings in itself. Yet it is only in the absence of such a Word that poetry can exist; the absolute Metaphor would render any degree of metonymy impossible. Poetry thus paradoxically circles around its own elimination, its silence, its death.

These complementary patterns of literary form relate back to the oldest myths of our culture. The biblical account of the genesis perfectly exemplifies narrative in that the progressive, strictly chronological creation of the world reaches its fulfillment in the appearance of Man, who names, identifies, and gives meaning to all that was previously created. But Man is expelled from this ultimately meaningful, self-contained universe and from then on constantly endeavors to regain access to it. One such effort is the construction of the Tower of Babel, designed to reach the heavens in a time when "the whole world had one language and a common speech" (Gen. 11:1). This language, though post-lapsarian, apparently still retains its divinely creative qualities, for even God himself concedes that "'if as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them'" (Gen. 11:6). He
therefore decides to confuse Language into arbitrary dialects so that the constructors will speak different tongues and the construction of the Tower—a vertical, ascending enterprise if ever there was one—will be thwarted. Seen as an attempt to synthesize post-lapsarian opposites, to regain access to the creative Word, the construction of the Tower of Babel is mankind's first poetical effort—an effort that fails and leads to further dispersion of meaningful language.

The Old Testament's description of the Fall of Language is complemented by the New Testament's account of the Redemption of Language in Pentecostal Jerusalem. Amid the "blowing of a violent wind," "tongues of fire" settle on the disciples, and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues... When [the people] heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked:... how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?" (Acts 2:2-8)

These Pentecostal events remind one curiously of the middle part of the ancient mariner's journey, where winds roar, but never reach the ship, seraphs stand as light signals on the sailors' bodies, and spirits gather in a song that is simultaneously bird's song, angel's song, and instrumental music. Lyrical poetry, then, the nucleus of the mariner's tale, is envisioned in its ideal form as a version of Pentecostal redeemed Language. It remains a moment out of reach, removed to a time after death—the death that the mariner so desperately searches for and yet permanently delays through his never-ending tale; the postponed closure of narrative turns into the poem's inaccessible center. But whereas narrative needs the ending to be meaningful, the poem's meaning derives from the deflection of narrative linearity into an all-encompassing circularity, which is what the term "lyrical ballad" implies:

The common end of all narrative, nay, of all Poems, is to convert a series into a Whole: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a strait Line, assume to our Understandings a circular motion, Coleridge writes in 1815 (Griggs 128). His "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," then, is an imperfect narrative—but a poem as perfect as it can be between Babel and Jerusalem.

Works Cited


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