Poetic Faith and the Philosophical Gloss of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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I.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is perhaps the most compelling vision of the strange and mystical in English poetry. It is an odyssey that takes us from a simple man’s wedding, a vision of edenic innocence, to a surreal voyage through an ocean populated by vengeful spirits and guardian angels. It forces us to suspect our narrator, whose sanity and understanding are all too easily called into question, even if the power of his vision is not. It forces us likewise to reexamine our own experience, and see, by or against our will, the mysterious and fearful world that lies behind the apparently mundane. It is a poem that leaves its hearer “a sadder and a wiser man,” and challenges his ability to come to terms with what he has witnessed. Indeed, the poem’s wild strangeness is so intense and irrational that when the Mariner finally delivers his last words to the Wedding Guest, in the form of a moral quatrain that almost seems more reminiscent of Aesop’s fables than the spiritual madness that makes up the rest of the poem, it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, for us to consider even for a moment that the Mariner’s experience could be reduced to such a simple lesson. Yet after a voyage of supernatural torment, in the middle of a lifetime of penance for the crime of killing a bird, the Mariner admonishes the wedding guest:

“He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all” (614-618)

If we have trouble trusting such a simple Christian moral as the product of this gothic sea-yarn, however, we have even more trouble dismissing it. The Mariner is old and hoar, but his words and his eye have a power that can not be denied. Although his tale is one of
arctic spirits and ghost-ships, it also deals with a “kind saint,” with angelic beings, with forgiveness, and with shriving. Further, we must contend with Coleridge’s formidable marginal gloss, which gives both explanation and commentary in a voice that is easily mistaken for Coleridge’s own. This unnamed interpreter of the Mariner’s tale hands us a seemingly valid reading of the poem as a Christian allegory, and goes so far as to expand upon the Christian imagery already in the *Rime*. The final gloss, commenting in part upon the stanza quoted above, reads “And to teach, by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth” (In 610). The unseen, all-knowing narrator’s endorsement gives much more value to the old seafarer’s pious ending.

This gloss therefore presents one of the greatest challenges, and aids, to readers of the poem. Unwilling to let the reader, like the wedding guest, listen to his tale with unguarded ears, Coleridge gives us an intermediary narrator to shield us from the Mariner’s sense-rendering power. Whatever interpretation of the story the reader may come to, he now has the direction, or the hindrance, of an almost irreproachable reading given by the author himself. Religious and moral questions are selected by this author as especially interesting, brought to our attention, and even interpreted by a speaker who either does not trust us to understand the poem or does not trust the poem to clearly relate its own message. The Mariner, for all of the moral education he has acquired, is no moralist, but the narrator of the gloss is, and his commentary turns our attention to the poem’s nature as a religious piece in a way that we might never otherwise consider. In the process, the gloss complicates and closes off other interpretations and by addition changes the poem itself in a way that, unlike external criticisms of the text (this essay, for example), we are unable to disregard.
To a reader accustomed to looking at a poem as something that can teach us a simple lesson, the *Rime* is unsettling and even distressing. On the other hand, to the reader who looks only for an experience in the poem without a lesson to be learned, the Mariner’s moral is a stumbling block, taking the reader away from the Mariner’s hypnosis and forcing him to look at himself instead. One of the changes that the gloss effects is the elevation of the moral issue in the poem, not only at its end, but throughout the work, and a corresponding elevation of the self-consciousness in the reader. From the crucial moment in which the Mariner kills the albatross, sealing his own fate, the themes of hospitality, unity with nature, and human piety never escape our minds, even as a story rich in images of a ghost-ship, a spectral crew, and a polar spirit whirls past. While a moral reading of the poem is not the only result of the gloss, it is one of the primary ones, and an investigation of the poem’s religious content, as enhanced or changed by the gloss, will serve as a point of departure for our own investigation into the effects of this strange narrative imposition.

After all, if a religious moral is indeed the author’s preferred interpretation, the marginal gloss is an ideal way to reveal it, particularly in this poem. The sea-travel books of which Coleridge was fond often included explanatory glosses, and so it serves to tie the poem to the tradition of revolutionary exploration and new-world discovery, of which the Mariner is firmly a part. The practice of adding marginal notes to a work predates Coleridge considerably, though. It originates with religion; with rabbinical Judaism, in which the Rabbis would write their own notes and interpretations of scripture to be read alongside the original. Nor was it uncommon in Christian texts, in which the writings of St. Aquinas or St. Augustine were often printed alongside the biblical text to which they
pertained. Thus Coleridge's gloss is not by its form unsuitable to the poem, particularly if its theme is, as it seems to be, at least partly religious. For the contemporary reader, by whom Coleridge's poetry may sometimes be read as religiously as scripture, an interpretation by the author may be as welcome and as appreciable as a saintly interpretation of biblical verse.

On the other hand, the poem is not scripture but poetry, and like all poems is presumably capable of conveying whatever message it might have without aid from critic or religious thinker. That is to say, a poem's purpose is poetic, and thus something different from a sermon or treatise. Whatever philosophical or religious means the Rime accomplishes are then likely to be both secondary and incidental. The inclusion of the gloss alongside the poem makes it both part of the work and obviously separate from it, but it is strange that these prosaic fragments of authorial interpretation should be included at all; they have the curious effect of explaining and altering a poem more than capable of standing on its own. When the Mariner tells of how "with my cross-bow/ I shot the albatross" (In 82-83), the gloss tells how "The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen." The theme of hospitality towards nature is central to the poem, of course, but we find ourselves asking 'why belabor the point?' More, why go to such measures to impose a rational, moralistic reading upon a poem that seems almost from the beginning to be inherently irrational?

The gloss explains and describes events, and is often quite poetic itself, buts its most frequent action is a critical analysis of the moral themes of the poem. One wonders what Coleridge's motivation might have been to add this critical perspective at all, and increase the moral overtness of the poem, when he himself recalls, in Table Talk,
responding with contrary intentions to a letter sent by one of his readers. A Mrs. Barbauld had sent him a letter complaining that the poem lacked a moral, and Coleridge recalls that “I told her that in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of pure imagination. It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights' tale of the merchant’s sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside, an lo! A genie starts up and says he must kill the aforesaid merchant because one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie’s son” (Bloom, Visionary Company 203). Coleridge himself seems less concerned with teaching the reader a lesson than with generating wonder, fear, and bewilderment.

The Wedding Guest, caught unawares though he is, is quickly overwhelmed and inspired with dread generated by the power of the Mariner’s tale in just such a manner, and so are we when we forgo our detached stance as literary critics and allow ourselves to engage as the enraptured audience, hearing tales of the gods as from around the primal campfire. Such sensations of wonder are neither rational nor easily explainable, even by a poetic gloss. Coleridge’s view, as expressed in Table Talk make it sound like such simple delight and wonder might be ends enough for a poem, and might in fact be the only worthwhile ends for a poem. Poetic language, especially the forcefully human language adapted by poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth, is well suited to emotional appeals, but it lacks the detachment from human experience necessary to create broader, more abstract generalizations. Such rational inquiry into the nature of the world is more likely the nature of philosophy, and the gloss, fortunately or unfortunately, has qualities of both.
Though rational, the gloss is undeniably beautiful. From the start, its imagery is as evocative as that of the poet itself, and the medieval tone fits perfectly with the Mariner’s tale. Explanations of scenes like the polar ice, about which the gloss reads “the land of ice, and of fearful sounds where no living thing was to be seen” (55) establish that although the speaker in the glosses may be a philosopher he is not without his own poetic capabilities. In *the Visionary Company*, Harold Bloom calls the gloss at line 263, on the Mariner’s loneliness, “a beauty of expression which seems to touch at the limits of art (Bloom, *Visionary Company* 204).” The emotional expression in many parts of the gloss is characterized, like the poem itself, more by its capacity to call forth powerful feelings than by the force of its moral interpretation.

And yet we can not disregard the moral nature of the poem. However, we must come to look at it as something other than our traditional concept of a moral. As this paper will demonstrate, the gloss serves both as a work of poetry and as a work of literary criticism, and as criticism, a form of philosophy. However, this philosophy is not the moralizing, reductive reading that it may at first appear, but a complex and organic encouragement for the reader to confront poetry in the manner that Coleridge himself believed it should be read, by readers who are in some way more than poets themselves. Although a moral is presented at the end of the poem, the *Rime* is work of moral exploration, not moral instruction, and it is this sort of exploration which leaves the Mariner, and the reader, dazed and awe-struck at the poem’s end, unable to draw solid conclusions. The purpose of poetry seems to be, for Coleridge, the development of a confusing and unsettling mystery. This mystery, which denies us every recourse save what Coleridge refers to in the *Biographia Literaria* as “poetic faith,” leaves us stranded in a world of ambiguities in
which strict morals and dogmatic religion have no meaning. Criticism, in the form that
the gloss presents, is what allows us to move beyond this ambiguity, not by piercing
through it or extracting a moral from it, but by accepting it as something beyond the
powers of language to directly illustrate. Thus we shall see that the gloss does not change
the poem so much as it changes the reader's focus, guiding him to accept, with love, the
religious mystery that so shocks and disturbs the reader. To do so, we must first confront
the problems that a traditional moralistic or experiential reading of the poem present, and
consider them as Coleridge himself no doubt did when he first wrote the Rime.

Both feeling and moral interpretation can lead to a form of religion, but the form to
which the Rime leads the Mariner and Guest is a humbled, awed, and fearful belief, in a
power enormously beyond mankind's understanding. In this respect, the gloss seems to
detract from the religious in the poem, and by explaining reduces it to something
narrower. It is a constant risk of criticism that, in analyzing a text, we may come to
consider that one reading among many is the right reading. If an ordinary critic
encourages such a reductive interpretation, the fault is the readers. If the author of the
poem, in a text that parallels the poem's own, offers such a reading, it can not be
disregarded. As we will see, the poetic language of the gloss mirrors a purpose that is not
altogether critical, at least not in the traditional sense. The purpose it does fulfill is a
narrative function neither precisely analytic nor overtly emotional. What we can be sure
of is that it stems from some perceived or actual lack within the poem proper, either by
Coleridge, or by his readers. An understanding of that lack will be helpful in establishing
any reading, reductive or not, of the gloss or the original poem.
That the poem is at the least capable of standing alone as an inspiring work, without
the narrative intrusion of the gloss, is obvious; for the first twenty years of its publication
it existed in precisely that form. Although a study of the Rime’s history will by no means
be conclusive, a brief review of it might give some insight into what could possibly cause
Coleridge, twenty years after the publication of the first edition of the Rime, to add a set
of notes which essentially strengthen the moral aspect of the poem, the aspect he seems to
have considered a weakness.

II.

Upon its publication in 1798, Lyrical Ballads, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and
William Wordsworth, was not accepted, in any circle, with the acclaim that its now
apparent merit would seem to warrant. Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” was generally
ignored, and Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancyent Marinere, now widely thought to be the
greatest and perhaps the strangest of Coleridge’s poems, certainly his best known and
most quoted, was criticized harshly even by men he counted as friends. The poet
Southey, Coleridge’s brother in law, called it a collection of “laboriously beautiful
stanzas” which came together to form a poem “poem of little merit” (Jackson 53). Other
critiques were much the same, or worse. It was called “the extravagance of a mad
German poet” (Jackson 52) and a general flight of fancy with no deeper value. Perhaps
more tellingly, reviews like one in the British Critic complain that the work “loses all
effect from not being quite intelligible” (Jackson 58). Whether intelligibility was
Coleridge’s objective is beside the point; readers were not arrested by the poem’s
mystery, they were merely put off by it. In Table Talk, Coleridge recalls being informed
by a publisher that most of the sales of *Lyrical Ballads* had been to sailors who had heard of the *Rime*, and thought it was a songbook (Gardner 23).

Coleridge himself was troubled, perhaps greatly troubled, by these negative reviews, and in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, which came out two years later, Wordsworth mentioned to his readers that it was by his own persuasion that Coleridge (who still remained anonymous) had allowed the *Ryme of the Ancyent Marinere* remain in the volume, since “the Author was himself very desirous that it should be suppressed. This wish had arising from a consciousness of the defects of the Poem, and from a knowledge that many persons had been much displeased with it” (Gardner 28). It is likely because of the negative reception that he modified many aspects of the poem in this second publication. He removed many of the more obscure Old-English expressions and modernized some of the spelling, such as changing “Marinere” to Mariner. In addition, he added the subtitle “A Poet’s Reverie;” an apologetic move which calls to mind the subtitle of his other great mystic poem “Kubla Kahn, or, *A Vision in a Dream,*” and gives more evidence to the great uncertainty which Coleridge himself seems to have felt about his work.

This change in title, at least, was not a permanent emendation, and we may speculate that neither was any change of heart Coleridge had about the poem. Nineteen years later, in 1816, he published *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* for a third time in *Sibylline Leaves*, without the subtitle. The text was modified somewhat more extensively than in the past. A few stanzas were inserted that added a sense of nautical realism to the poem (Coleridge had never been aboard a ship when he first published *Lyrical Ballads*), and a few passages were removed that perhaps seemed too gothic and horrifying for his
sensitive audience (such as one, in Part III, in which the wind blowing through the bones of the skeletal Death "Half-whistles and half-groans"). More significantly, the new modifications included the addition of the marginal gloss, with which the poem almost always appears in current publications.

Had the gloss been added with the second edition, or shortly after the first set of publications, it would be easy to see it, like the subtitle, as a reactionary measure to counter the critics who called his work unintelligible. The space of full twenty years between publications, however, forces us to doubt that suspicion. Although it is possible that Coleridge wrote the gloss years before it was ever published, it is the form he ultimately chose for the poem. More, the Sibylline Leaves edition was the first time the Rime was ever permitted to be published with his name attached, implying that he had come to feel a certain comfort with the work. By this time, Coleridge was an established and respected lecturer on religion and German idealist philosophy. The gloss was accepted by its audience, and remains accepted with little complaint.

III

Without the gloss, the moral of the poem, if it has one, is difficult to discern. The Mariner's moral, on the other hand, is obviously not doubted by its speaker, and his exhortation of love is delivered with the same powerful earnest and simplicity that make the whole of his tale so irresistible and compelling. While we may be hesitant to interpret the religious setting of this holy poem as an expression of Coleridge's own piety, there is an inextricable link between poetic experience and religious need in the Rime. An understanding of the poem's approach to the audience as a text with a moral or religious
agenda depends upon an understanding of how the Mariner comes to create a moral from his own experience. Morality and religion in the poem are far from the same thing, and while the latter may lead to the former, it is the religious inspiration that the poem induces which must finally be of greatest importance to the Mariner, and to us. The process by which the poem’s powerful but ambiguous tale is translated into a life lesson for the Mariner, and more importantly, for the wedding guest, is an example of how the same story may be intended to teach a lesson to the audience. However, while poetry can, and perhaps very often does, inspire the development of a moral code in its hearers, moral instruction is far from the most important of poetry’s effects.

On its own, unglossed, the Rime is the tale by and about a simple man, one who, as Wordsworth complained, “has no distinct character” (Gardener 28) and is always acted upon rather than acting. This quality makes him into something of an everyman, at least at the beginning of the tale, one who becomes separated by his experience from humanity at large and turned into an alien wanderer with strange powers. He does not seem to fully understand his experience, but that may well be because what he has seen is, like the Genie in the Arabian Nights, inherently incapable of being understood, or without any meaning divorced from the events themselves. Even without the gloss, there is no question of whether this experience is religious, at least to him. His first reaction upon reaching the shore is to be shriven by a holy hermit, and his only comfort from the pious dread he feels is

“To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,
While each to his great Father bents,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
And youths and maidens gay!” (605-609)

He has come into first-hand contact with something infinitely larger and more complicated than he could have been prepared for, and unable to question that experience he is incapable of moving beyond it. He has seen God, and as a result has been changed forever. The nature of this divinity is more difficult to ascertain, and is a question that neither the Mariner nor the wedding guest is capable of, or interested in, answering.

The God we see in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is not precisely an Old Testament god, although the story itself has its roots in the Hebraic myth of the wandering Jew; a popular story throughout history, adapted by Percy Shelley among others, which tells of a man who mocked Jesus on his route to crucifixion and was thus cursed to wander the earth until the messiah comes again. Like the Jew, or Cain in the Old Testament, the Mariner commits a crime and is forced to pay for it by alienation from the world and a sort of eternal homelessness. It is the oldest of tales; that of humankind outcast from the garden for eating a piece of fruit and doomed to wander a barren wilderness forever, suffering from the knowledge of good and evil that it has acquired; an acquisition which also elevates it to something godlike in its own right. The Mariner’s crime is unpremeditated, committed with neither malice nor understanding of its repercussions. The knowledge that he gains, which is a knowledge both of repercussions and of the seeming senselessness with which they may fall, does indeed confer upon him a certain creative power, which allows him to tell stories of such potency that they hold innocent wedding guests in helpless thrall. This power is not understood by its bearer, however, and it does not bring him satisfaction.
The God in the *Rime* is one who delivers (or at least permits) punishment out of measure for the crime committed (for, rather than cursing the Messiah or killing a brother, the Mariner has only shot a bird) but he also values love, and beauty, as evinced most strongly in the Mariner’s blessing of the water serpents, and in the glory of the angelic host. More, this is certainly a God that “loveth” *all* living things, as the Mariner says, since he seems to value the life of a bird even more perhaps than the life of a man. It is a God allied with nature and the natural world, and crimes against nature are crimes against him. What the poem implies, and the gloss spells out plain, is the theme of hospitality, which hearkens to the ancient Greek tales in which Zeus would go out disguised as a beggar and reward those who treated him well and punish those who abused him. Throughout history, particularly in medieval times, charity towards the helpless was considered among the highest of virtues. The Mariner’s crime is against the least of God’s servants, and therefore against him.

While the deity himself is never seen, we do hear of a “kind saint” (286), and of the Virgin Mother, and an angelic host actually appear to the Mariner at the end of his voyage. On the other hand, although the angels swear “by him who died on cross” (399), grounding this God firmly within the Christian tradition even without the aid of the gloss, we encounter numerous other spirits and strange figures that have no place in that tradition. How are we to incorporate the polar spirit, for instance, or the ghost ship of “Death” and “Life-in-Death”? The Mariner’s voyage is perhaps more concerned with these figures than it is with the expressly religious ones. Further, the great shelves of ice and the vast and lonely ocean are described in more beautiful and compelling terms than any of the ghosts. The first edition of the poem posits a world populated by wonders
natural, supernatural, and spiritual, but makes little effort to explain or categorize them without the gloss.

In the end, the poem neither adheres to a religious system nor seeks to establish one. The Christian elements of the poem are in keeping with the medieval language, and in keeping with Coleridge’s own religious devotion, but the emphasis of the poem is not on the faceless punisher and savior but on the “love” that he represents. If there is a true uniting force in the poem, one that is both religious and universal, it is the great uniting power of love that the Mariner discovers as result of the wonders he has experienced, and of the terror and incredible isolation that comes when an individual cuts himself off from that love, as the mariner does when he kills “the bird that loved the man/ Who shot him with his bow” (404-405). As a source of torment and compulsion in itself, the holy love that the Mariner learns is of a different sort than the traditional concept of a warm and sheltering emotion, but this love too is at its core a type of shelter. The Mariner clings to it after his travail as the only sure moral he has learned, the only possible saving grace in a world capable of terrors as potent and unpredictable as he has seen.

The moral quatrain at the end can thus be read not as the moral, or at least not the only moral, of the Mariner’s experience, but as a statement about the human spirit in reaction to what it does not understand. Having seen more beauty and terror in this world than his own mind can comprehend, his recourse is to faith in a higher power (lack of faith is not an option), and a reverence for the vastness of nature. The poem makes no attempt to develop a system for that faith, and indeed implies that such systems may themselves be meaningless. The Mariner’s faith is justified by what he has seen, but his newfound knowledge of his own smallness prevents him from defining the limits of his
spirituality. The Mariner's religion is not discovered or delineated by reason, and is therefore not instructional but experiential. When he offers us the same lesson, it is not an admonition given with the hope of changing out behavior but an expression of his, and therefore our, only way of escaping despair in a world suddenly grown too large.

IV

This concept of human frailty does not undermine the Mariner's power as a poet or storyteller. Quite the opposite, it is the source of his narrative power. The story that he tells, like the faith that he expresses, is useful to the Mariner for its assistance in finding a place for man in this suddenly larger world. Poetry is not the creation of a godlike intellect, but the last recourse of a man made desperate by experience. The telling and retelling of his poem, though, is more than a personally cathartic way of defining an idea too enormous for simple expression. Through the language of the Rime, the Mariner actively re-creates the power of his experience in the eyes of the reader or the ears of the listener. As the Poet he is a teacher of sorts, and by romantically engulfing us in the strength of his own recalled pain and partial triumph he brings us to see the world through his eyes, with all of its fearful brilliance.

Further, the world he has uncovered is too large for the hearer as well, for after the Wedding Guest has listened to the Mariner's tale he too stands outside the world, and suffers from the "penance of life." The product of this penance is sadness, and it is significant that poetry is not, to Coleridge, something that exists to bring entertainment or pleasure in the usual sense. It may ennable us, but it is not something for which we are likely to thank the poet. Knowledge, when it is the intuitive and personal knowledge
brought by poetry, as opposed, for instance, to the analytic and abstract knowledge of philosophy, can not be taken casually by those who know its significance. The defining element of poetry, and of the *Rime*, is its ability to make us aware of that significance, whether by our will or against it. This awareness is not something we accept or reject, and an attempt to reject it can only bring about great pain, like the pain that the Mariner suffers in his "life in death" when he rejects the love of the albatross. Neither is this weighty knowledge something that we can acquire by reason, or by criticism. It is emotional, which is why the Mariner is compelled to tell a story rather than write a treatise, and why Coleridge chooses, in this case, to write a poem instead of the *Biographia Literaria*. Poetry acts, as it does upon the Wedding Guest and the Mariner, by plunging the hearer into experience that is as forceful, in a way, as if it were physically endured.

Coleridge’s Mariner is a powerful poet, to hold his audience so entranced and work such an effect upon it. By observing him, we may see what, exactly, it is that a poet should do, what it is that Coleridge is perhaps trying to do to us when he writes the poem. It is obvious from a casual reading that the Mariner is no philosopher; the effect he accomplishes in his readers would likely be both undesirable and impossible for a philosopher. Where a philosopher might make abstractions, the Mariner tells a story. Where a philosopher would attempt to explain, the Mariner only raises new questions. In his essay on slavery and superstition in the *Rime*, Tim Fulford points out that Coleridge uses numerous devices within the text to increase the feeling of mystery (Fulford 52). Archaic language "is blended with common speech," so that the setting, and the speaker, feel both familiar and divorced from time and location. The term "Ancient Mariner" is
the first and most prominent example of this, a name whose meaning is both familiar and hauntingly strange. Coleridge also uses parataxis, the device in which causal links between phrases are omitted, creating a greater surrealism and suggesting that the reader's focus would be better spent on something other than cause and effect. Events and results are important in this poem, but causes can be guessed, at best. The world of the Mariner is not a rational one, and through poetry he makes it impossible for his audience to rationalize their own world.

It is well to note, of course, that although both Mariner and Guest experience something harrowing which they do not expect, the Mariner experiences it physically because his own profession invites it, and the Wedding Guest experiences it through a story, not because of anything he has done but because of who he is; perhaps he seems to happy, or too free of care, and so the Mariner like a force of nature descends upon him and seizes him. The reader stands somewhere between the two. By willingly engaging with the poem, we enter ourselves into a process the end of which we can not anticipate at its outset. Like the Wedding Guest, he is awakened from lassitude not by deeds but by words. Freedom from care, the frequenting of weddings, the casual reading of poetry, become themselves a sort of crime, for which the poem's hearer must do penance. They must be newly awakened to appreciate the pleasures that simple men take for granted, and they must be inspired with the same reverence for nature and the unknown that the Mariner's own experience has taught him. This is not the role of the Mariner's poem; it is the role of all poetry, the definition of poetry; it takes hold of the reader and shakes him, by exposing him to strange and emotionally powerful experiences which the reader, and even the poet himself, is not fully able to understand.
Because of this disconcerting power of poetry, in reading the *Rime* we become, like the wedding guest, spellbound hearers caught against our will and are forced away from carelessness into noticing the world around us. The Mariner’s ideal listener is the one upon whom the greatest change will be worked, one who will “beat his breast” at the sound of the bassoon. It is a simple man with simple cares, untroubled by the wider world of unseen things. Like religious awakening, for such an awakening it ultimately is, the Mariner’s speech makes ordinary life harder, and complicates the joy that we take in happy occasions like a Wedding ceremony, but presumably this complexity, or awareness of complexity, elevates such ordinary pleasures into something more important and worthwhile. The poet accomplishes this elevation, not the philosopher, and both Coleridge and the Mariner are beings tormented and changed by the emotional force of the poetry they create.

This emotional force comes from imagery, of course, as the imagery of the skeletal death, the corpse crew, and the angelic spirits may be fearful or inspiring to us, but poetry is representation, and so it must be ultimately by language, and language alone, that poetry inspires or terrifies us. Coleridge’s Mariner relates a story, one whose veracity is as dubious as its presentation is powerful. Were the Mariner a philosopher, and we students seeking to learn a lesson rather than reluctant hearers looking for something less definable, we would ask to see his credentials. That is to say, we would want proofs of the accuracy of his statements, logical and physical. If his purpose were philosophical, he would tell us the reason why he shot the albatross, why a loving god would inflict such punishment, and why he wanders from place to place telling his story. Instead, he asks us those questions, and forces us to look for the answers within ourselves. The only clue he
allows comes from a moral quatrain at the end; an admonition to divine love as a last recourse in responding to a question that can never be fully answered.

Therefore, by its indefinable potency and life-changing force, the Mariner’s experience is indeed religious, and that religious knowledge is imparted also to the Wedding Guest, who serves as a sort of apostle to the poem’s audience, bringing us a message from some higher being, proclaiming fear and doom, but also emphasizing our removal from it. The Wedding Guest is entranced by the Mariner’s “glittering eye,” but we have the option to accept or reject the poet before his work is finished. Whether we can be strong enough, or fearful enough, to turn away from the Mariner’s story once we have heard it is another question. The Wedding Guest never sees a dead man walk, but the sight of the Mariner himself is enough to captivate his attention, just as ours is captivated by the ambiguous promise of the opening lines “It is and Ancient Mariner, and he stoppeth one of three” (1-2). Once enthralled, the harrowing experience of the poem is itself enough to inspire renewed gratitude among the living, even if it does take some of the wilder revelry out of life. That is to say, the Mariner’s story is of strange seas, but one of its effects upon the Guest is to make him more appreciative of the safe harbor in which he has always lived. The moral quatrain can be read as his final expression of this happy peace, as a refuge in simplicity made more important because of the mystery that threatens to intrude upon us.

Scottish writer Margaret Oliphant defended the Mariner’s moral from a similar perspective in her Literary History of England (1882), saying that it brings the poem to a daring and relieving conclusion, and takes us “back to the common soil with a bewildered sweetness of relief and soft quiet…sinking from the highest notes of spiritual music to the
absolute simplicity of exhausted nature” (Gardner 231). The Mariner’s simple lesson, and his own tired and peaceful departure, does effectively bring the poem back from its glimpse of unknown religious mysteries to a more human level, contrasting our view of the large and unknowable world with an appreciation for the small and limited creatures that we are in comparison. It is both a comforting and an unnerving view; one which undermines the value of the scientific exploration that was taking place in Coleridge’s time while reemphasizing the value of simple faith and unquestioning humility. In this light, the Mariner’s own passivity stems not from a flaw in character, but from a flaw in the human character. He does not act because he can not act; we are all of us at the mercy of nature, and of God. If poetry’s great worth is in its ability to alert us to our own weakness under heaven, the quatrain may be an indication that the same poetry has at least some power to reconcile us to that weakness as well. Again, that reconciliation comes not through God, the power to whom poetry forces us to bow, but through the deep love which Coleridge’s Mariner demonstrates that God to embody. It is a simple solution to the problem of the world’s complexity, but Oliphant and the Mariner seem to find the simplicity itself both a great problem and the only solution to a potentially greater one; once our situation within the world has been displaced by poetry, how are we to find ourselves again?.

The Mariner himself, wandering without even an understanding of why he wanders, is the embodiment of this lost state. If we are to take the Mariner seriously, however, we also must acknowledge that we may perhaps be capable of discerning more than he can. The gloss helps us to do this, as does the Wedding Guest. For instance, with a degree of separation from the text like the gloss provides, we are able to escape the hypnotic power
of the Mariner's eye, and can see that he is in many ways a simple man, with little capacity for analyzing his own world. He is acted upon, and unable to understand his experience he responds with fear (and with fear of the Lord). It is important to recognize that the Mariner does not tell us his story directly; there is an intermediary. We see not only the Mariner's experience, but also the reaction of the unwilling hearer, the Guest. Looking at the Wedding Guest's response tells us something about the fear that we experience when we read a poem; by seeing his reaction we may see the same reaction in ourselves. Our detachment from the Mariner gives us a bit of distance from his hypnotic powers. We are not forced to submit to the poem's power, and if we do so it is at least in part by choice. One effect of this detachment is that we see the Mariner more clearly as a character, and thus recognize him for the very small, limited, and passive creature that he is. While he is monolithic as a storyteller, his power (like Coleridge's) stems from the force of his vision.

That vision extends beyond his own ability to tell of it, or interpret it. In The Visionary Company, Harold Bloom considers the Mariner as a man who, like the romantic poet, has seen the truth, "but the truth has not set him free." To him, the Mariner's compulsive wandering and story-telling are the acts of a man unable to comprehend his own experience, who tells everybody he meets "the story of his own salvation and the one moral in it that he can understand." To Bloom, the Mariner is not incorrect, but his interpretation of his own story is far from complete. His task seems to be not the interpretation of his vision, but a reinterpretation of self to come to terms with what he can not understand. When he returns to port, his homeland has not changed, but he has. It is because of this that the very sight of him drives the pilot's boy "crazy," and
causes him to mistake the Mariner for "the Devil" (In 569). To adjust to life with the knowledge he has found, poetry is both a reliving of the cause and the solution to it. His tale forces the Wedding Guest to similarly redefine his own standing in the world, and turns him, perhaps, into another sort of poet, but neither is capable on their own of giving a conscious critical hearing of the story that so affects them.

At the end of the poem, we discover through language the same sort of displacement that the Mariner does, although the way in which we come to it essentially as readers of poetry is likely to bring us to something different than a sense of connectedness to nature or of religious necessity (although we may very well gain both of those as well). When we see the Mariner as a poet, whose task is to re-form the world into something strange and terrible, then our first discovery is of poetry as something with the power to instill the same sort of awe and fear that the Mariner feels. More, we come to see poetry as a force with the power to connect us, as the Mariner by his otherness can not be connected, with our fellow man and with the divine inside of ourselves. Upon reaching at last dry land, the Mariner approaches the Hermit. He pleads:

"O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy Man!"
The Hermit cross'd his brow-
'Say quick, quoth he, 'I bid thee say
'What manner man art thou?"

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrench'd
With a woeful agony,
Which forc'd me to begin my tale
And then it left me free." (607-615)
It is not the Hermit’s religious power or purity that saves the Mariner, but the poetic reliving, and thus redefining, of his experience. His story is likewise to us something cathartic, which reconciles us to the vastness of nature even as it introduces strange wonders beyond our comprehension. The Mariner’s humility and his power come from knowledge of this strangeness, and his poetry is his own way of rebuilding the world in the eyes of his listeners, and reintroducing himself to humankind. Religious mystery is the result, in which the Mariner and his audience can “walk together to the kirk/ And all together pray” (606).

Though the Mariner can pray, however, he can not stop telling his story, and so it seems that the relief provided by poetry is both socially oriented (it exists in the sharing of the tale) and in some way incomplete. Though the Mariner has acquired the hard-earned power to bless the slimy creatures of the deep and to accept that he has a place beside them in the world’s larger order, he remains dazed and overwhelmed by the vastness of that order, and the uncertainty of his own small role. Poetry as it is presented by Coleridge is thus not without its risks. A poem, like the one that the Mariner experiences and the one we experience with the Wedding Guest through his telling, is a force that tears away false feelings of security and leaves us exposed to God and the elements. Without the possibility of comprehending the world, we lose the options of pride, of meaningful rationality, and also of action of any sort. What is left is a humbled refuge under the expanse of a larger natural world, and an intuited understanding of dependence and interconnectedness, a feeling of religious necessity that is accompanied by religious “love.” It is this love that enables the poet to go on living in the world with some kind of satisfaction, but it is also this fearful love that compels the poet to wander
from land to land telling a story without rational motivation. Lacking the possibility of comprehension, new action is impossible, and so the poet goes on in an infinite reliving of the past, redefining it through verse as it is recalled.

V.

If walking together to pray at the kirk, as poetry somehow prompts us to do, is one solution to the disjointedment that the *Rime* induces, it is still a non-analytic solution that offers at best a continuation of life with 'wisdom,' in terms of poetic understanding, but not comprehension. This comprehension, and with it the possibility of personal change and action, is what the poem lacks most essentially without the marginal gloss. If there is a possibility of overcoming the feeling of displacement that poetry induces, it would seem that this possibility must necessarily be something which is, in its effects, un-poetic, and perhaps even anti-poetic. If a poem can be defined by its ability to dislocate us from the world, than any effort to relocate ourselves, by any means, is not poetry but something else, even if it approaches us in verse, spiced with imagery and rhyme. By means of a second intermediary, the narrator of the gloss, Coleridge uses the tools and techniques of poetry, such as evocative and unfamiliar use of language, confusion of meaning and reorganization of thought by line and stanza, to give us a means of acquiring understanding as well as acceptance, bringing the poem's wonders back within the realm of science and reason, or, if that is impossible, within a new realm of understanding; that of metaphor, allegory, and systematized literary devices. We can read the gloss not a search for a moral, but as a search for a place for ourselves, as readers of poetry, within
the poem's structure. To achieve this, the gloss has only to create a structure from what already exists within the poem itself.

Coleridge's Mariner, the gloss makes clear, exists in a theology definable by both mystical uncertainty and transcendence and by logical (although not scientific) systems. Much of Coleridge's life was devoted to a struggle to find or build such a system within the field of philosophy that would reconcile mysticism, like that in the *Rime*, with reason, a task that preoccupied him especially in later life. To accomplish it, he turned to the German idealist philosophers, but also to contemporary Christian philosophers and writers like David Hartley (after whom he named his first child) and Thomas Burnett. The Latin quotation that opens the *Rime* gives us a glimpse of this passion of Coleridge's. The quote was added along with the gloss, in the *Sibylline Leaves* edition in 1817, and is from Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae*. Burnet was a philosopher whose first work, *Telluris Theoria Sacra* (1681), won him much acclaim in his own time by its attempt to describe a logical world order encompassing both man and God (Gardner 42). The *Archaeologiae* was a much more controversial work, made so by his suggestion that the biblical account of the fall might have been an allegorical tale instead of a factual account. It is not difficult to see where Coleridge would have found appeal in such a reading; the tale of the Mariner is itself such an allegory.

The epigraph can be read as a statement of purpose, though the purpose described is different than the one we have discussed. It reads, in part, "I easily believe that there are more invisible than visible beings in the universe. But who will tell us the families of these?... I do not deny that it is good sometimes to contemplate in thought, as in a picture, the image of a greater and better world; otherwise the mind, habituated to the petty..."
matters of daily life, may contract itself too much, and subside entirely into trivial thoughts.” It describes a world of mysteries generally incomprehensible to men, which the poem goes on to incarnate. Yet the quotation also tells that these mysteries can yet be revealed from time to time, as they are to the Mariner by fatal chance and divine act, and to us and the wedding guest through poetry. More, the motto seems to imply that such revelation leaves open the possibility not only of seeing the mysteries, but of understanding them. It includes an admonition to “diligently seek after truth, and maintain a temperate judgment, if we would distinguish certainty from uncertainty, day from night.” The clear headed and rational, it seems, can see in a way that accepts the world and its strangeness, and is capable of discriminating even within a world of mysteries. This mind may be that of the poet, but something else seems to be required, something more than poetry, for all of its power, can allow. Understanding may perhaps be a trait more attributable, in Coleridge’s eyes, to a mind like Burnett’s, that of the philosopher/religious theorist. The maintenance of a temperate judgment is certainly the Mariner’s habit after his voyage, though he has perhaps seen enough of divine mystery to last him a lifetime, but he never reaches, or seems capable of reaching, more than a slight understanding of the “greater and better world” of mystery that he has seen.

And mystery Coleridge gives us in full. His world is populated by spirits, or “daemons” both divine and foreign- the spirit of ice and snow that loves the albatross seems himself both disconnected from theology and above it, bound by irrational rules that allow him to take vengeance upon the Mariner but prevent him from crossing the equator. It is therefore more than problematic to read the Rime as a religious allegory, since it refuses entirely to be so simplified. In a reading without the gloss, the daemons
remain entirely unexplained and elemental, like Coleridge’s genie in the well, but the
gloss offers a very different explanation. “A spirit had followed them,” explains a gloss at
line 131, “one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels;
concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan,
Michael Psellus, may be consulted. They are very numerous, and there is no climate or
element without one or more.” Instead of leaving us to accept, as the medieval tone of the
original invites us to, the existence of the spirits as in some work of Arthurian legend, the
gloss makes an effort to help the reader suspend his disbelief, to provide a rational place
in his own universe for such irrational beings. Whether such an effort can be worthwhile
is less certain, for the potential costs are high. The move separates us from the magic of
the poem, and also from the simple wonder of its protagonist. It is difficult to envision the
Mariner, perhaps between his trips to the kirk, considering the philosophies of Marcus
Psellus as an alternate explanation for his experience.

In exchange, the gloss serves to change our own position, as readers, from
bewildered travelers in a strange land to scientific and logical men of the 19th century,
whose own religion was defined rationally by thinkers like Montaigne and Leibniz, and
challenged even more powerfully by empiricists like Hume. As Richard Haven points
out, “Coleridge was separated from the Ancient Mariner’s world of spirits and ghosts and
visions by two centuries of intensive analysis of the nature of the physical world and of
the nature and limits of human knowledge from a ‘scientific’ rather than from a
teleological point of view, an analysis in terms of the causes of events rather than their
purposes” (Haven 480). Because the rational readers, with these inquiring minds, were
(and are), presumably, the ones that were actually reading Coleridge’s poem, the gloss
perhaps acts as a bridge between the age of superstition in which the Mariner lives and our own age of reason. It takes away some of the work of the reader, by bringing the text to us instead of forcing us to go to it. Like rabbinical notation in Jewish holy text, it helps us accept the text; to interpret it, since interpret we must, with an eye inclined towards proving what is seen, not disproving as an empiricist inquiry would seek to.

As a text itself, and a narrative one at that, the gloss remains a work separate from our world. No reader, modern or otherwise, feels a possibility of believing in the physical reality of the ghosts that haunt the Mariner. The indication, in the gloss, that the ghosts are rationally credible in the Mariner's world does not make his world our own, and it remains a requirement for us to accept that world on the terms of its own creation, whatever those terms may be. That the ghosts exist to the Mariner is obvious to any reader, and that existence becomes no more or less credible with additional explanation. What does occur when the text includes explanation, however, is a challenge for the reader to craft such an explain for himself. Whereas in the medieval text faith was all, the glossed Rime demands a faith that is also inquisitive, one that reaffirms itself through logic even while questioning its own extent and nature, as the glossal narrator questions and expands upon the themes already present in the Rime. Meanwhile, as the narrator questions the poem's inclusion of the spirits, and the natural order that they may represent, the poetic mystery remains unquestionably mysterious, and the love that it inspires underlies his investigation.

This acceptance does not prevent the gloss from separating us from the Mariner's tale, however, and part of its role is to force us to see the work as readers, instead of (or in addition to) participants. If the Wedding Guest serves to make us aware of the
Mariner's existence as a poet, rather than a mere sailor, the gloss makes us aware of our own role as readers, both listening raptly like the Guest and struggling to create our own readings like that constructed for us by speaker of the gloss. There are advantages to this position, of course. Readers are capable of engaging in philosophy, they can criticize, and they can intellectualize a process which is at its start artistic and elemental, not intellectual. The contrary risks are first that the reader's position as elemental and experiential will be compromised, and second that the unnamed marginal narrator's view will overpower and limit the expanse of broadly inclusive poem as it originally stands. Science and art are different fields, and the mingling of them, even with such creative science as that of Burnet, is not always beneficial.

Perhaps fortunately, then, the glossal linking of the arctic spirit with the philosophy of "the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus," does little to clarify its place in a scientific Christian hierarchy, save to establish that such a place may indeed exist. If Coleridge's objective is to develop through the gloss a scientific theory of Christianity, or to apply such a theory to his poem, these spirits only loosely related to religion are at best a complication. 'They are not contrary to God,' the gloss seems to say, where before it never raised the question at all. In spite of that incorporation, they remain beyond our understanding, and if there is a scientific explanation for their existence, one which calls them natural creatures instead of supernatural ones, then we must simply revise our conception of nature. In the end, the introduction of such spirits, and their further qualification in the gloss, can say no more to us that there may in fact be more things under heaven than are dreamed of in our
philosophy, a sort of rational counterpoint to the unscientific conclusion reached by the Mariner himself.

And no reader looks to the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* for science. As we shift from looking at the Mariner as a sailor to seeing him as poet, we must also shift from a scientific viewpoint to one more appropriate to a work of literature. As readers of poetry, after all, our philosophy, while analytic, need not be scientific. Literary criticism is the end that the gloss encourages in the reader, and questions about metaphor and allegory come to take precedence over questions of physical nature. As the epigraph implies, the two may be more linked than a cursory inspection indicates, and whatever the gloss may turn it into, a lyric poem should not and can not be read as a scientific dissertation. The scientific elements that do exist in the poem, the philosophical system implied by references to Burnett or Josephus, are themselves devices in the pursuit of something that is not contrary to the poem’s mysterious power, something more like telling a story in which we can see ourselves than developing an equation that we can quantify.

Thus we recognize that though the gloss is indeed concerned with the scientific and rational, it would be a great oversimplification to consider only those aspects. Parts are concerned with clarification, almost without interpretation, as in part two, at line 107, where the note reads “The ship hath been suddenly becalmed,” while the text beside it reads

“Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!” (ln107-111)
Glosses such as these perhaps clarify the original text, but they add little to it. They do, however, establish the speaker of the gloss as one clearly detached from the Mariner. This speaker has his own objectives, which are separated from the poem; he speaks in the past tense and so we read him as above the text of the original Rime. Because his interpretation encompasses the Mariner’s but is not encompassed by it, we may be tempted to read it as the only interpretation, but his own words are likewise open to our analysis. In the end, the Mariner’s word is prime, and though the speaker in the gloss can comment on his tale, he can not change it.

Moreover, this speaker is a poet. His language is more modern than that of the Mariner, and more educated, but some of his notes use stylized language that retains an archaic quality. While the note on the polar daemon’s historical justification reads more like one of Darwin’s treatises on nature, others, like the one that follows, sound like a separate poem, written by a different author, on the same subject as the original. “The shipmates, in their sore distress, would fain throw the whole guilt on the ancient Mariner” reads one at line 139. “In sign whereof they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck.”

There is little of science, or of philosophy, in this note. Instead, the gloss takes on the task of forming a coherent story or allegory; another reading which in itself is a story worth perusal, from what at first reads as a dream or a nightmare. As his language and imagery make him a poet, his role as a finder of themes and an interpreter of poets makes the speaker a critic of literature, an elevated role that stands neither clearly within the creative side of art nor in the scientific domain of traditional philosophy. His position as critic allows the reader to better understand his role as a reader. It is not to be passively
overwhelmed, like the wedding guest, but to take a part in that process, bringing to the text experience from life, and taking from it a new way of looking at that experience.

The allegorical tale that the gloss creates is not a fable, and it does not seek to teach a moral lesson, even though the Mariner’s interpretive process does lead inexorably to a moral. In fact, morality for its own sake turns out to be quite beyond the poem’s point. In *Coleridge as Moralist* Laurence Lockridge explains that “when he (the Mariner) blesses the water-snakes ‘unaware’ in a ‘spring of love’ we think momentarily that the curse has been expiated. But this is the delusion of the moral perspective. Love of the creatures and humane concern for his crew prove to be insufficient propitiation. The Mariner’s (and the reader’s) sense of justice is offended by the seeming willfulness of the Polar Spirit, or of God himself, if this Spirit be his representative” (Lockridge 265). Lockridge goes on to claim that Coleridge’s philosophical text “Aids to Reflection is in effect an effort to argue away the terrifying import of *The Ancient Mariner*, which would lead us, since it jars our moral feelings, to hatred of God” (Lockridge 266). The poet does not seek to instill piety or even theorized religion in his reader; he seeks only to instill a sort of faith, to eliminate doubt in all things. Hatred of God may be the immediate result of the poem, for Mariner, Wedding Guest, or reader, but doubt of his existence is inconceivable.

Of course, hatred for the divine, lack of trust in the world’s moral order, and the state of general shell-shocked piety in which we find the Wedding Guest at the end of the poem is perhaps not the ideal state in which to leave the reader. His life has been reduced to a new and fearful lack of importance by the power of the poetry he experiences, but is he then to be left marooned on the shore of a new land without a guide? Questions have been raised, and it is up to the philosopher, the critic, the religious teacher, to try to
answer them. Coleridge does just this, twenty years after the poem's first publication, with the inclusion of the gloss.

The tale that this critical text reveals is supported by the Mariner's, but not precisely the same as the one he tells. If the story the Mariner weaves is one of overwhelming mystery, that of the gloss is about a man who commits a crime, does penance for it, and learns a lesson, which he goes on to impart unto others. While in the first poem the strangeness itself is the point, to the marginal notes the strangeness is incidental to the allegory. The first is a story of a man's fall from innocence; of his discovery of himself as a small and unimportant part of the world. To the reader, the emphasis is upon his voyage and return, and it closes in deliberative silence. In the gloss, the Mariner makes the same discovery, but more important is the fact that he has by poetry or by God found some place in the world upon his return. Directly against the effort of his own will, he has experienced what must be an ultimately beneficial fall, and the gloss is not an unpoetic account of this event but a philosophical and narrative story of found reverence. The original Rime, as published in Lyrical Ballads is not so optimistic. It ends, as the poem ends unglossed:

"He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn. (622-625)"

This contrasts with the brighter message in the marginal text: "And to teach by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth." In the original there is a deep sense of uncertainty over whether the wisdom gained is worth the sadness
lost; a very Romantic problem indeed. In the glossed edition, the emphasis is not on the change that the character has undergone, but the holy love that he has come to teach.

This story of earned love and reverence is as open to interpretation by the reader as the original poem ever was, and is just as much a work of art, but it achieves this through logical argument and occasionally dogmatic religious commentary. In the first, the emphasis is on the discomforting vastness of the world, which shakes those who hear of it and forces them to painfully change their course. The marginal gloss’s emphasis is on penance, and surmounting penance through love in a Christian sense. This commentary is at times divergent from the Mariner’s tale, but its moral of universal love fits well within the framework set by the printing from *Lyrical Ballads*. Without the gloss we may suspect the Mariner’s motivation; the Mariner himself feels it as a dimly understood compulsion and not a conscious choice, but we can never doubt that Coleridge believes in a deep love that dwells within the human heart, and shines through unexpectedly, even when man himself is unaware of it, as when the Mariner blesses the water snakes without knowledge of what he does (287).

The gloss does not seek to overcome the poem’s mystery by exploring it, but its inquiry into the nature of the Mariner’s love helps the reader to appreciate its scope. The Mariner himself understands that he was changed, and knows how this change took place. His poetic force comes from his appreciation of the scope of that changing power, and his inability to move forward comes from a failure to investigate nature of that power. The gloss encourages the investigation that the Mariner does not undertake, but it can not help us to grasp the scope of the poem’s mystery, or the love that comes from it, and it does not try to.
More importantly, though, while the printing of the glosses alongside the original poem leaves that poem intact, it also sets into play a conversation between these two parallel tellings of the same story. The tale that is created when the two of them are combined is different, and more complete, than either of them can accomplish alone. The glossal commentary forces us to look at the text as more than a story of a man who sees something he is unprepared for; it elevates the Mariner’s struggle to the level of a spiritual text, one that thus says something about God and nature as well as about man. The first poem, a story about how we as readers and as human beings confront the inevitable unknown through art, is modified to become a poem also about how we should confront that unknown, and what form that art will ideally take. While the Mariner tells his story without understanding, the author of the glosses seems to possess the understanding he lacks. By viewing the Mariner’s own storytelling compulsion as an upwelling of love and desire for connectedness with the rest of nature, we can come to appreciate the Mariner himself as more than the victim of events beyond his control. Rather than a man who has been set apart from the world, we find him a man who has found his place in a world of poetry that most of us, like the guests on their way to the wedding, have no knowledge of. Happiness is not the result of this knowledge; both the Mariner and the Wedding Guest are less happy for their discovery, and Coleridge’s *Rime* is even with the gloss a grim poem, but wisdom can perhaps take the place of joy. If it is the role of poetry to expose us willingly or unwillingly to our own smallness, to force us to confront the grandeur and mystery of the world, than it is the role of criticism to help us find the place within ourselves where that creative and compulsive knowledge of the mysterious resides.
VI.

Although the philosophical and religious guide provided by the gloss can point the way to that mystery, it is important to recognize that poetry, and poetry alone, ultimately allows us to experience the world ordinarily beyond our reach. While philosophy is interested in definitions and in equations, poetry is interested in ambiguities and the empty spaces between philosophical rules, and it is in these undefined spaces that mystery can be allowed to exist. The criticism that takes place in the gloss is the same sort that we acquire as readers of philosophy, or even as natural scientists, though in this case we take the more exceptional role of natural scientists subordinated to the knowledge of an overarching divine order. The classification of parts in order to form an understanding of the whole is the business of science, and this science becomes philosophy when it is extended to a search for understanding of human nature in addition to the natural world. Poetry, of course, helps us to see human nature in a new light, but philosophy defines what we see when poetry reveals it to us. Philosophy as applied to poetry is thus, to Coleridge, inseparable from philosophy of man, or even of the natural world. This philosophy can be exceedingly poetic, to be sure, but criticism, which we will in this essay equate with the type of philosophy to which Coleridge was dedicated, is not the same thing as poetry. Through his own works of philosophy, we come to see that poetry is characterized by its ability to give substance to the mysterious and indefinable. Unlike philosophy, it does not depend upon precision of speech or accuracy of terms. Philosophy, on the other hand, is the revelatory force which allows us to appreciate poetry, and by appreciation develop a relationship with it.
Coleridge the philosopher, the author of *Aids to Reason* and the *Biographia Literaria*, is aware of the separate spheres that these two arts inhabit, and while his criticism and even his poetry blend the two forms, his own criticism, as practiced in these works, very specifically allows and denies distinct properties to each. Philosophy, the field that Coleridge later favored in practice, even if the philosophy he wrote still included a glorification of poetry, is the field that answers questions, that points the way. Coleridge sees philosophy as our best way of understanding ourselves and our place in the world in relation to God. Poetry's function, on the other hand, is not explanatory. Instead, the poet builds and disassembles worlds of his own, raising new questions for the philosopher to answer. If *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* features the voices of both religious philosopher and poet, the melding of the two is an unusual one, and each voice has its own role to play.

The best explanation for Coleridge's own ideal for poetry comes in the *Biographia Literaria*. In it, Coleridge discusses and analyzes the philosophical purpose he had when he originally wrote the *Rime* for inclusion in *Lyrical Ballads*. While Wordsworth's task, he says, was to write about subjects "chosen from ordinary life," his was to write about the supernatural, in a manner that would "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" (Coleridge2: 6). Doubt is often necessary and is perhaps even the basis for philosophy, which exists to call into question the things we take for granted. Coleridge claims, however, that this same doubt is directly against his intention in writing poetry, and likely against the purpose of all poetry. The mystery that is created by Coleridge's *Rime* is not
built to be questioned, and indeed gains its power by overpowering our ability to question. Analysis on some level is possible with poetry, even philosophical analysis, but poetry does not exist to be analyzed. The purposes of the two disciplines are thus not only distinct, they are completely opposite. If the gloss is an attempt to answer the ambiguities of the *Rime*, then it is a failure poetically. If, instead, it is in some way an effort to answer the question of how or why such ambiguities can be made to exist, as a successful poem will prove they must, then it is something different entirely. As we will see, the Gloss is in fact just such an effort.

Coleridge's effort to induce poetic faith with the *Rime* was unorthodox, perhaps too unorthodox for the majority of his contemporaries, but it has also proven to be successful. Readers of the Mariner's adventure must suspend their disbelief, not because his story seems incredible, as it does, but because credulity is beyond the point. The information provided in the gloss, that the angelic beings who discuss the Mariner's fate in Part V are "The Polar Spirit's fellow daemons, the invisible inhabitants of the element" (In 394) is likely irrelevant to the reader of the poem, not because it is disinteresting, but because the reader, who is compelled like the Wedding Guest to hear the Mariner's experience, is concerned with what becomes of the Mariner himself, and not how it comes about. The Mariner generates this concern through his manner of telling how events transpired rather than looking for their explanations, and the power of his language brings the events to us with an urgency that belies interpretation. There is no room for asking questions as the poem takes place. The Wedding Guest asks only one; "why lookst thou so?", at the end of the first section, while the holy Hermit asks "what manner of man art thou?" in part VII, a question which receives a similar response; an entire story, which somehow
becomes its own justification, and the only possible justification. Nobody asks why the
Mariner tells his tale, and any answer the Mariner could give to such a question, beyond a
compulsion he does not himself seem to understand, would be worthless. Lyric poetry
neither explains itself nor anything else, and deemphasizes entirely the legitimacy and
importance of causality.

Because it was the only work of its type Coleridge was able to complete by the time
of Lyrical Ballads’ publication, the Rime appeared as a solitary “interpolation of
heterogeneous matter” (Coleridge1: 8). Almost all the other poems in the collection were
Wordsworth’s, and were aimed not at convincing the audience to suspend disbelief, but
rather at convincing the audience to find a new kind of faith in things that they once
might have considered mundane, or beneath the notice of poetry. This objective was
based in Wordsworth’s own theory of poetry, with which Coleridge for the main part
agreed. Wordsworth was interested in using poetry to further real emotional concerns, to
discuss matters of personal life and faith that were simple and universal. For
Wordsworth, poetry is most essentially an emotional work, to be judged by the strength
and accuracy of the emotions it explores. Coleridge, likewise, believed poetry should be
universal, but in the second section of the Biographia he takes issue with aspects of
Wordsworth’s design.

In the preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth spells out a
philosophy of poetry. His objective is to make the entire language of poetry “the very
language of men,” without “personifications of abstract ideas” (Wordsworth 484).
Coleridge’s concept of poetry is something less accessible than Wordsworth’s, or at least
less accessible than Coleridge believes Wordsworth’s to be. Unlike his peer, Coleridge
does not seem to consider poetry, or his *Rime*, to be “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” which “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (Wordsworth 490) but rather an exploration of the realm of the imagination, a more abstract and even religious act of creation. Personifications of the abstract, such as the character of “Life in Death” are useful to this end. Archaic language, like that of the *Rime*, is acceptable even though it very little resembles the language of the common man (and was criticized for this when first published). In fact, in *Anima Poetae* Coleridge mused that the elder languages were superior, poetically, because “poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.” A general understanding is not requisite to strengthen or weaken the emotional content, but it is desirable because it discourages closed interpretation, and forces the reader to focus more on the non-intellectual parts of the poem. Poetic creation is deeply emotional, to Coleridge, and emotional content is perhaps the most obvious of these non-intellectual aspects, but the sensation to be inspired in the reader of poetry is greater than any mere emotion; it is something that transcends logic, feeling, and individual experience to create a connection with the eternal and the spiritual. To Coleridge, ideal poetry, true imaginative creation, is almost inseparable from religion.

Coleridge’s own fame as a critic, appropriately, comes not from his definition of poetry but from his definition of the imagination. At the end of the first volume of the *Biographia*, he defines a difference between Imagination and Fancy. He divides imagination into two types, primary and secondary, but asserts that they are essentially similar in “kind” and differ “only in degree.” What he calls “Fancy,” however, is “memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified
by that empirical phenomenon of the will” (Coleridge 1: 305), a statement grounded in
the British philosophy of the time. This sort of imagination is not poetic, nor really
creative, and it is perhaps the only type of creation that can possibly exist according to
empiricism and the only type that can ever be understood according to the philosophy of
Immanuel Kant. On the other hand, Coleridge’s concept of the imagination, especially his
definition of the “primary” imagination, goes beyond the limits of Britain’s empiricism
when he calls it “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a
representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”
(Coleridge1: 304). The secondary, although it combines and works with objects that are
“essentially dead” is yet a force that works towards the idealization and unification of
these dead objects. While Fancy is then a dead process, a simpler recombination of dead
items, the Imagination is a creative force, making living organisms from dead matter.
This sort of creation occurs linguistically, but if it is indeed something truly new and not
merely a recombination of old words then it must in some way transcend language. In
this way, we come to define poetry not as a linguistic exploration of the world around us,
but as a vessel that carries its reader to another realm of experience. Therefore, it is
impossible to express this form of imagination in strictly rational thought or philosophy,
whose structures are themselves concerned with understanding and defining what already
exists. While Coleridge’s explanation of the primary imagination is one presented in the
tradition of philosophy of mind and religion, the creative process that his definition
explains is a practice that exceeds the certainty of the former and the structure of the
latter, and so it must be the realm of poetry alone.
The *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a poem that explores this sort of imagination, not by making the mundane strange but by plunging the reader into a world of poetic strangeness. Its archaic language and the otherworldly imagery dissociate the reader from the normal and understandable, and force us to encounter a world that can be, at best, only "generally and not perfectly understood." Within this generality, though, we discover a deeper connectedness with nature that the Mariner likewise discovers through his experience. Poetry is experiential, it is emotional, and it gains its power not by being difficult to read (though many readers may find it so), but by being, like the *Rime*, difficult to understand. Coleridge closes the first volume of the *Biographia* with a reference to the *Rime*. He leaves much unsaid, but hints that the workings of the supernatural, at least in this poem, may well be what he considers the essential key to the poetical imagination. "Whatever more than this, I shall think it fit to declare concerning the powers and privileges of the imagination in the present work," he says, "will be found in the critical essay on the uses of the Supernatural in poetry and the principles that regulate its introduction: which the reader will find prefixed to the poem of The Ancient Mariner" (307). Such an essay, if it was ever written, was never published.

VII.

Coleridge's role as a great poet made him uniquely suited to develop a philosophy of poetry that takes into account the mysterious and supernatural. His concept of poetic faith is one that forces the reader, and the critic of poetry, to confront a poem on terms that allow it to remain mysterious, as only an author of such mysteries could reveal. Further, his understanding of German and English philosophy must equally have been an
education in the advantages and limitations of that field, one which allowed him to honor the scope of philosophy without allowing it to reduce poetry to anything less primal and urgent. Coleridge's work elevates poetry and philosophy both into something more universal than they might otherwise be considered. Poetry becomes divine imagining and universal human religion. Philosophy retains its position as interpreter of the universe, but Coleridge is not content to accept the empiricist idea of philosophy as only the interpreter of images, without the possibility of attaining real truth. The challenge to overcome it, and in so doing unite philosophy and religion as he had religion and poetry, was one of the most important driving forces in all of his philosophical endeavors. It is an objective he fulfilled perhaps most effectively, though, in his philosophical interpretations of poetry, which recognized God as something other, approachable only by the imagination at its most powerful, and by his poetry itself, which overcame empirical boundaries by achieving just such heights of imagination. Coleridge considers philosophy's powers to define and discuss noble, but they do not provoke such powerful sentiments as are expressed towards poetry in the *Biographia*, or expressed by poetry in works like "The Aeolian Harp". It is perhaps strange, then, that Coleridge's own career as a poet, which included his greatest successes in bringing self and audience into connection with the divine, came in his early life, while the greater part of his career was dedicated to philosophy and criticism of works he only sporadically produced.

In *Coleridge as Religious Thinker*, James Boulger traces a fairly abrupt and powerful change in Coleridge's intellectual and emotional life, a transition from poetic inspiration to a more sedate, philosophical temperament, to approximately 1802. By contrasting poems like the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and "The Aeolian Harp" with his less
appreciated later works like "Ne Plus Ultra" and "Constancy to an Ideal Object," Boulger comes to the conclusion that Coleridge’s later poems treat emotion in the same way, but use it for different purposes. While in the pre 1802 poetry, like the Rime, “the emotions aided in the blurring of ideas and structures generally regarded as belonging to the poetry of the romantic imagination; later the emotions became the means of dramatizing the opposed ideas and dualistic conceptions of Christian paradox in poetry” (Boulger 198). Boulger reads this paradox, which became something more like an obsession to Coleridge, as the product of searching for reconciliation between the post-lapsarian fall of man and his accompanying separation from nature. Nature was always a crucial figure in Coleridge’s poetry, both a source of inspiration and an untrustworthy but compelling power, and the respect for man’s unity with nature involved in the Rime’s admonition to love all living things is a testament to its importance. As Coleridge grows older, his study of man’s relation to the natural world becomes ever less optimistic and more desperate, both philosophically and poetically.

Boulger portrays this increasing despair as Coleridge’s own fall, and as a mental fall from the poetic imagination to the rational or philosophic temperament, one which paralleled the growth of his own dedication to Christian thought. “Intellectual acceptance of Christian dogma and metaphysics unfortunately did not carry with it the free, spontaneous commitment necessary for good poetry” (Boulger 198), says Boulger. “Emotion was the driving force behind all the great early work. Given, then, the emotional failure in the late poetry, it is no surprise that Coleridge is not remembered as a great Christian poet” (Boulger 199). It is not an happy vision of Coleridge the poet, at least in his later years. Coleridge was an artist who always doubted his own relation to
the muse, and Boulger seems to see him as one who finally, as at the caprice of the
Rime’s brutal God, fell from poetic grace. There can be no denying that his poetry grows
more infrequent after the termination of his friendship with Wordsworth. Whether this is
because of his increased interest in the abstractions of German philosophy, because of the
cessation of contact with his friend and fellow poet, or because of some other cause, it is
difficult not to imagine that some force from within or without caused the poetic will to
desert him, as poems like “Dejection: An Ode” evince he had always feared it would.
Whether he found, and whether we can find, sufficient recompense for its loss in the
more mundane demands of philosophy is another question, but one not unrelated.

Corresponding to his “deterioration” as a poet, time brings about a rise in
Coleridge’s prominence and skill as a Christian philosopher, single-handedly introducing
(often through plagiaristic appropriation) the German philosophical tradition to his
country. His poetic energy and creativity seems to transfer itself directly to philosophy,
and to an increasing exploration of German idealism and mysticism. Boulger’s analysis
depicts a failure to integrate philosophical preoccupations with poetic impulse the prime
cause of the deterioration of Coleridge’s poetry. He considers Coleridge’s poem Reason,
which closed the essay Church and State, a summation of “Coleridge’s final
epistemological position.” The 1830 poem reads:

Whene’er the mist, that stands ‘twixt God and thee,
Sublimates to a pure transparency,
That intercepts no light and adds no stain--
There Reason is, and then begins her reign !

But alas !
--'tu stesso, ti fai grosso
Col falso immaginar, si che non vedi
Ciò che vedresti, se l'avessi scosso.

[You yourself blind yourself
With delusion's dream, so you do not see
What you'd see if you had shaken it off.]

The Italian is from Dante's Paradiso. In Boulger's opinion, this poem is "a mediocre expression in poetry of what (analytic texts) Aids and Opus Maximum said in prose. Like other poems of the late period (post 1802) "Reason" lacks the imaginative and structural interest of the early poems" (196). Boulger's harsh diagnosis: "Coleridge... failed to relate his hard-won vision of revitalized Christianity to the experiences of daily living" (Boulger 197).

If poetry is, as Wordsworth at least seems to believe, an earthly work crafted from and having to do with the intimate and physical work of life, than Reason's unemotional verse is a far cry from it. The poems of Coleridge's earlier years, which deal with more immediate and human concerns, are a species much different from this. Reason is not an ugly poem, but neither is it uplifting, and it does not attempt to be. It lacks the human quality to make it applicable to the lives of its readers, and lacks the divine quality to work change in the reader. After hearing Reason, no Wedding Guest will be grieved, or even affected. By the definition we have devised, that of mysterious force, Reason is scarcely a poem at all. Instead, it is a logical exaltation of logic, an exhortation from a teacher to his pupils or a minister to his disciples. If we can judge poetry by its power to
impact the individual, as the Mariner impacts the wedding guest, than *Reason* is more akin to the work of philosophy to which it is attached than to the body of Coleridge’s poetic works. In spite of the beauty of its imagery, it is philosophy, and what merits it has are primarily philosophical ones.

What are those philosophical merits, then? Philosophy bequeaths upon its practitioner the power to define, to systematize, to organize and comprehend the world. Philosophy, at least the anti-empiricist philosophy of Coleridge, is the power to form abstractions, to make general principles. It is the power to advise, and even to moralize, as Coleridge does in *Reason* and in works like the *Biographia*. More, as the gloss reveals to us, if poetic power is the capacity to be affected by a text, philosophic power is the ability to *read* a text, to form a conscious dialogue with it, asking questions of it and answering questions according to the moral directives that it reveals. To generalize, poetry is the search for truth, and philosophy is the search for a way to classify that truth. Without poetry we are ignorant of our place in the world, we are careless and small-minded. Without philosophy, poetry has the power to halt us irreversibly, as it does the Mariner. The ability to make judgments, as Coleridge makes in his critical works, is our way of adapting individual life to the terrifying general feelings of poetry. We know the risks of poetry, but the risks of philosophy are perhaps even greater.

In his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth defines the symbolic depiction of abstract ideas as one of the greatest of anti-poetic tendencies. He writes that “the personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes, and are utterly rejected, as an ordinary device to elevate the style” (Wordsworth 484). If personification is an anti-poetic device, however, it also seems that direct confrontation
of the abstract is meaningless without a presentation in “the language of men,” separate from the unattainable ideals which these abstractions represent. While the personified ideals in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and even in later poems like *Ne Plus Ultra* are one example of this tendency towards abstraction, the whole field of philosophy, as practiced by thinkers like Hume and even Kant, may perhaps be seen as another. While poetry helps us to live our lives, philosophy helps us to understand them. Unfortunately, this understanding remains mere theory until a means is given for its application. The empirical caveat against the reality of impressions sets up doubt as a barrier to such application. For Coleridge, who theorized God, the world, and nature in one contiguous system, this barrier must have been especially troubling. Overcoming it meant finding a way to speak to God directly, if not consciously, as through the imagination. Coleridge’s philosophy, which is not based on sensory experience, is instead an alternate route to the truth empiricism denies us. It is not concerned with the accuracy of daily impressions, and directed instead towards exploring the methods by which we define those impressions, the structures of self that we build in order to define our world. The great risk remains abstraction, but in this case it is the type of abstraction that plunges us into doubt, forcing us to question the legitimacy of poetry’s powers as well as the effects that they induce.

In this light, Coleridge’s attempt to eliminate empirical doubt from philosophy appears to be precisely the type of effort to unite philosophy and poetry that he sought; one allowing at least the possibility of a *true* religion, explorable by philosophy even if it is beyond Philosophy’s power to verify. Boulger calls *Reason* a failure in this regard, and perhaps rightly so, but what of the creative elements of Coleridge’s philosophical texts?
Some of these, surely, approach the definition of the primary imagination that Coleridge put forward in the *Biographia Literaria*. More, what of Coleridge's other poems? If poetry as religion was not enough, that is, if philosophical understanding of God is required in addition to experience, then it seems to follow that the most effective philosophy Coleridge could create would be the one that most resembled, and was most easily integrated with, a work of poetry.

As *Reason* is a less successful attempt to integrate philosophy and poetry, an ineffective imposition of philosophical abstractions into poetic forms, I posit that the *Sibylline Leaves* edition of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* can be read as a more subtle, and a more successful, melding of the two disciplines. While Boulger places the *Rime* in the canon of Coleridge's 'unfallen' poetry, at the height of his imaginative power, the marginal gloss was likely written much later, and was published fourteen years after Boulger's critical year of 1802. The Coleridge who wrote them is much closer to the essay writing scholar of German, the Christian philosopher and "sage of Highgate," than he is to the younger poet. In his biography of Coleridge, Richard Holmes notes that the gloss is "the same device he used in his "metafictional" letter in the *Biographia* (Homes 418)." He also notes the strong German poetic influence on Coleridge's writing, saying "one might almost catch, behind the stately seventeenth-century phrasing, a hint of Germanic accent and oracular inversion" (Holmes 419). The gloss, we have already ascertained, is critical. It is a type of philosophy, unlike the *Biographia*, that is indistinguishable in its presentation from poetry itself. What *does* differentiate it from the poem is its purpose, which aims at interpretation rather than revelation. Such an interpretation, unlike the making of abstractions that Wordsworth feared, is a personal
process, one that allows the individual to compass the work by bringing it to him, and him to it, in a mutual narrative development. Poetry is religious already, but the type of interpretation the gloss provides allows the reader to make that religion practical, and so escape both the trap of the two extremes of poetic and empirical immobility.

VII

It is easy to picture an older Coleridge, Coleridge the philosopher and critic, going back to his earlier work with fresh eyes and new intentions. Originally he wrote the poem to introduce strangeness in such a way that the reader would be forced to suspend disbelief and experience “poetic faith.” This strangeness takes the form of archaic language, of unusual imagery, and also of moral ambiguity. By attempting an interpretation that the Wedding Guest, in his terror, is unable to risk, the narrator of the gloss imposes a form upon the ambiguity of the Mariner’s tale, and allows it to become a moral lesson in addition to a poetic one. Morality of this sort, based on anything other than human expedients, that is, based on abstract ideals rather than social happiness or health, is impossible under an empirical philosophy, but that does not prevent Coleridge from making statements that are philosophically sound while grounded in universal maxim rather than physical experience. As we will see, Coleridge’s Rime uses poetry as a means of circumventing the barrier between fallible man and infallible ideal, and allows Coleridge to moralize and interpret without casting the type of doubt that would be dangerous to the faith that poetry establishes.

The gloss, the poem’s most obtrusive means of imposing a moral, although not its only one, is perhaps not the voice of Coleridge the Critic, but it is the voice of a critic, a
reader in the process of building a specifically philosophical and religious reading of the poem. An aspect of this critical reading is the religious interpretation of the poem that the gloss advances. Facilitating this reading is another possibility of interpretation, one concerned with a philosophy that will allow for that religion, that is, a philosophy that, by accepting the ambiguities that poetry presents, leaves room for a freedom from metaphysical doubt. While the gloss encourages interpretation of the poem, it is important to recognize that the gloss itself exists parallel to the Rime, and so must be read as part of the poem even though the voice is separate. As such, the criticism of literature that it encourages in the Rime becomes also a criticism of philosophy when we apply it to the gloss. The extent of our philosophical questioning is both enabled by the gloss and directed by it, but since that philosophy arrives through a poetic medium, it is open to the same questions that the Mariner's tale is, and benefits by the same ambiguity. This questioning is unnecessary for us to appreciate the poem as a work of poetry, but to see it through the eyes of philosophers, as the gloss implies we must, questioning is unavoidable. Thus philosophical criticism is superfluous in a reading of the Rime as it exists without the gloss; with the gloss, however, criticism it is unavoidable.

It is traditional for critics to read the Rime as a poem about the fall of man. In In Quest of the Ordinary, Stanley Cavell embraces that reading, but also claims that the Ancient Mariner can be understood as a response to Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. He reads it as a work of philosophy that logically, although also poetically, discusses the process of imagination and the overcoming of philosophical skepticism. Both readings are viable in the original poem, but neither has the weight or importance that they acquire with the addition of the forward and marginal gloss of the Sibylline
Leaves edition. The inclusion of an overtly philosophical voice in the poem forces the reader to become more than a wedding guest impacted by a world beyond his power to imagine. Suddenly, the reader must be a critic too, and is perhaps equipped to integrate the Mariner's experience into his world in a way that the Mariner himself can not.

The criticism that is revealed to the reader is an expression from Coleridge's philosophy, one derived largely from German philosophers such as Schelling, which attempts to take the philosophy of Immanuel Kant farther than Kant himself in an effort to define a world free from empirical skepticism. Kant himself referred to his project as "limiting knowledge in order to make room for faith" (Cavell 31), an objective that Coleridge accepts enthusiastically, although his concept of both knowledge and faith is less limited than Kant's. Writings like the Biographia Literaria are one way to carry out this quest, which for Coleridge emanated from and returned constantly to God, "the infinite I AM" (Coleridge: 304). If the skepticism generated by empiricism was the problem, than the Christian God he came to believe in ever more strongly throughout his life was the reason to pursue a solution, and poetry was ultimately the only way to achieve it. The philosophy he sought to find in the German idealists, and that he struggled to create from their influence, was all a movement in the direction of a new tradition that would not explain God to the world but reveal him in such a way that would make explanation unimportant. As such, the philosophy that describes such poetry must be one that explores, criticizes, and defines, but likewise does not explain.

Coleridge's legacy as a philosopher is considered fragmented and inconclusive, at best. Coleridge never formulated a complete philosophical system, and his work tends to be highly digressive. He is criticized further for his tendency to borrow, and even steal,
from other writers (Kant and Schelling among them). Digression and appropriation from other writers are both common in poetry, as well as in philosophy, but they are perhaps looked upon with more tolerance in the former. Cavell implies that Coleridge’s works like the *Biographia Literaria* were essentially as jumbled as they were not because Coleridge was unable to maintain a straight train of thought, but because “the end is, or requires, continuous self-interruption” (Cavell 42). Such interruption or “stuttering” is common in poetry, especially Romantic poetry, which may turn one way and another in order to force the reader to see not only a poem but also himself within the poem. Wordsworth addressed the audience as a man speaking to men in order to humanize the profound. Interruption takes place in Coleridge’s poetry as well, brought about overtly by devices like the gloss, but also more subtly by characters like the Wedding Guest who by their proximity to the narrator make the reader aware of his own individuality in relation to the text. Through the use of such techniques in works like the *Biographia*, consciously or not, Coleridge brings his works of literary criticism closer to being works of literature, or even poetry, in their own right.

The *Biographia*, however, neither attempts to find, nor succeeds in finding, room for an undoubtable God, although it does take great steps towards an unquestionable poetry. For a rational explanatory force that can conquer empiricism entirely, and go beyond Kant’s boundaries, a different kind of philosophy seems to be in order; one that goes so far as to rely upon the forms and conventions of philosophy-ennobled poetry itself. Cavell’s consideration of Coleridge’s *Rime* as both a metaphor of the fall and as a deeper metaphor of the philosophical exploration of Kantian metaphysics is based on his reading of one of the glossal notes at the start of the Mariner’s journey, which tells how the ship
set out “southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the line” (In 24). This line he reads as “the line implied in the Critique (of Pure Reason) ‘below’ which or ‘beyond’ which knowledge cannot penetrate” (Cavell 50). Cavell reads the poem as a post-Kantian metaphor seeking access to the unseen world that British Empiricism brought into question and that Kant himself claimed was forever unavailable to our experience or understanding.

In such a reading, the supernatural specters and strange events serve not only as an example of the strange and unknown in the mundane world, they also work as a sort of poetical metaphysics; a look at what becomes of each of us when we “cross the line” into the dangerous, treacherous, and beautiful realm of the Biographia’s “primary imagination.” Where Kant describes philosophy as incapable of seeing past the images of things in order to gain knowledge of “things in themselves,” Coleridge uses poetry to plumb the depths beneath reality’s deceptive surface. This exploration is not accomplished by means of explanation: Coleridge’s work does not contest Kant’s claim that the truth is unexplainable, only that it is unknowable. The path to God, and unquestionable truth, is through an introduction to the strange, the disconcerting, and the non-dogmatic. The mystery that we have identified as source of poetry’s power is here defined philosophically as the mystery that empiricism fails to comprehend. It is a truth that can not be uncovered through shriving, nor through penance, nor through obedience to a moral quatrain, although the emotional power behind poetry may require attempts at interpretation that mirror all of these, less happy parallels to the successful philosophy practiced by the gloss.
When Coleridge first wrote the *Rime* in 1798, he already had some knowledge of German philosophy and mysticism, but did not yet have the knowledge or deep compelling interest in German philosophy in general, or in Immanuel Kant in particular, for his intention to be the conscious construction of a Kantian metaphor. That interest grew over time, especially after his trip to Germany shortly after the publication of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. He had certainly reached that point by the time *Sibylline Leaves* was published in 1817. Coleridge’s similar interest in the German idealist philosophers, especially Schelling, is reflected in the *Biographia Literaria* and it is not strange that, even if his original intention was not to write a romantic counter to philosophical skepticism, his later additions should turn it into such a piece. Intention aside, the poem exists in the eyes of the reader as a multi-layered work in which elements of philosophy and religion mix almost indistinguishably with the poetry. If poetry, especially an introspective and self-analyzing poem like the *Rime*, is the key to experiencing that which philosophy is unable to know, than this poem can surely be read as a metaphor for that kind of experience. Whatever merits philosophy has, it is ultimately poetry that shows us a glimpse, however imperfect it may be, of the world as it exists beyond the “line.”

In spite of this, the poetic in this work is not constructed to defeat philosophy. Coleridge was deeply invested in philosophy himself, both as a reader and as a practitioner, and if the *Rime* is a philosophical work in any sense than it must be such in a way that attempts to reconcile poetry and philosophy, even if imperfectly, just as we perceive them reconciled in the biography of Coleridge’s own life; two different routes to the same divinity. Cavell presents the poem’s central problem as that of overcoming the
empiricist's skepticism, the skepticism that makes certainty in religion impossible to the rational man. The reconciliation of poetry and philosophy that takes place in the glossed *Rime*, in which each depends upon and supports the other, "presents itself as the necessity of recovering or replacing religion" (Cavell 43). In the *Rime*, the narrative gloss can not be allowed to overwhelm the mystery of the poem by questioning or explaining it, and it does not. Instead, it takes that mystery, which is indeed religious, and helps the reader to make it his own. Poetry takes the place of religious truth, and philosophy the place of spiritual study.

Religion, as it was established in his time, is to Coleridge unreachable, abstract, and ultimately destructive to its followers. Boulger's consideration of Coleridge the fallen poet, Coleridge the frustrated philosopher, is at its core the story of Coleridge the devoted Christian struggling with the separation he feels from nature and from his god. The Mariner likewise experiences this separation, and the partial reconciliation he obtains is a hint towards a fuller one that we may pursue. An attempt to reconcile philosophy with poetry, if that is what the gloss is, can be simultaneously read as an attempt to reunite the immortal soul with the beautiful and temporal world and an attempt to reunite Wordsworthian poetic emotion with the detached abstractions of cold, rational thought. As Lockridge says, "the eighteenth-century debate between rationalism and sensibility, already somewhat arbitrated in theory by Joseph Butler, is more pointedly addressed by Coleridge, who, in the spirit of the Cambridge Platonists, argues that thought and feeling are reconcilable. One can feel a thought and think a feeling" (Lockridge 221).

It would be a simplification to call poetry the domain of feeling and philosophy the realm of thought, but whatever accuracy there is ordinarily to such a statement is blurred
further by the *Rime*, which presents philosophical interpretation in the form of poetry itself, confusing the lines between two genres ordinarily separated. Critical inquiry ordinarily takes place in essays, like this one, or books, like Coleridge’s *Biographia*. The presence of interpretive elements within poetry itself forces us to reconsider what, precisely, the role of philosophy is, and what form it must ideally take. In the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, we receive a philosophy that is changeable, adaptive, and organic. It is the only philosophy that could possibly address a poem like the *Rime* as the very human, and yet unapproachably divine, object that it is, and that all poetry is when we look at it as an exploration of underlying unrationlizable truth.

VIII.

If the Mariner can indeed be perceived as the philosopher beyond the realm of philosophy, we must consider ourselves, the readers, similarly voyagers in uncharted waters. There may indeed be a “philosophy” within the Mariner’s tale, but attempting to read the poem as we would Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* would be unproductive, as well as impossible. Instead, we must read the poem as rational poets, allowing ourselves to be swept up in the passion and wonder of the story while still looking for the significance of the themes that underlie it. There is a reason that the Mariner and Guest are unable to systematize their own experience; poetry overwhelms us, and can push us into repetition and despair. The gloss helps us to hold on to separate reading as we progress, but as part of the poem, the gloss is itself a confusing and mysterious force. As the wedding guest and the Mariner demonstrate, maintaining any sort of objectivity as the
poem progresses is not an easy task. The poet’s role is a compelling one, and it is difficult 
not to be overwhelmed by his force, even, and perhaps especially, if we resist it. By 
casting the poem’s interpretation in the language of poetry, though, Coleridge suggests 
that objectivity is itself undesirable. The objective philosopher is perhaps more like the 
inhuman writer of abstractions, however, than an actual being who can be meaningfully 
changed by poetry. The reader of the gloss is encouraged to maintain an individual 
reading of the poem, separate from that of the gloss, but separation is not objectivity, and 
in the end what the gloss creates for us is not a generalization of the poem’s meaning, but 
a personalization of it. If we can delve into the mysterious only by succumbing to 
poetry’s effects, than any philosophy about that mystery must be similarly influenced by 
the unpronounceable strangeness.

Thus the value of the gloss’s speaker lies not in his poetic force, although this force 
is great, but in his powers as a philosopher, covertly utilizing the devices of poetry to 
further his own critical ends. The gloss is an defining and elaborating device, and if the 
poet’s business is to ask questions that challenge idyllic simplicity, the philosopher’s (at 
least, in terms of Coleridge’s own pedagogical approach to philosophy) is at least in part 
to uncover their answers. So it is that when the Mariner’s poem unveils mysterious 
forces, the gloss speaks of the “learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic 
Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus.” Cavell discusses how the gloss makes the Rime 
itself readable as a work of philosophy when he considers the glossal line “The 
shipmates, in their sore distress, would fain throw the whole guilt on the ancient Mariner; 
in sign whereof they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck” (139). Cavell observes that 
this line associates the Mariner with the bird and, by the self sacrifice implicated in his
crime, with Christ (Cavell 61). Other lines, such as that at the end in which the "penance of life falls upon" the ancient Mariner after he asks the Hermit to "shrieve" him emphasize the same story of retribution through suffering. While the poet tells a fragmented and unclear story, one which is made meaningful by its vagueness, the philosopher ties, or attempts to tie, those fragments together into a cogent meaning, a story with an understandable arc, or a metaphor with a quantifiable reference. One such metaphor is that of the fall, which the gloss builds when it speaks of "crime" at line 97 and "penance" at 230 and 430.

Another such metaphor is the one Cavell points out, of the explorer who has voyaged beyond the Kantian "line." If this is indeed a task of the glosses, it is an interesting one; Kant establishes that the philosopher can never adequately explain the world of things in themselves, and in attempting to do so he runs the risk of further occluding them by the crafting of more images. Therefore, all the gloss can do, philosophically, is point to the existence of a separate story, and suggest that there may be more than meets the eye. Its powers of explanation are reduced to identification, pointing the way instead of defining the course. As the gloss referring to the angelic host does not create the poem's Christian imagery, but only reveals and categorizes it, so also can the motto from Burnett on the existence of mysteries allude to the unexplainable in the poem without making an effort to explain or define it. "I easily believe that there are more invisible than visible beings in the universe. But who will tell us the families of all these?" By placing the question at the opening of his poem, Coleridge makes the answer central to the reader's experience, without ever responding directly. A categorization into families is a philosophical task,
one Burnett himself might undertake, but more important than categorization is revelation, which can only be given by the poet.

Even with the lack of moral certainty, this role of poetic creation is one tied inextricably to religion, even to Christian religion, though a religion radically different from dogmatic Christianity. Coleridge’s increased preoccupation with Christianity and with man’s fall is reflected throughout the gloss. The narrator is “a learned antiquarian, a Christian commentator from the seventeenth century, who seeks to interpret the ballad like some mystical allegory of punishment and redemption” (Holmes 418). It is a reading of younger Coleridge by his older self, and if it is true, as Boulger states, that Coleridge’s poetic powers decreased in his later days, then it seems likely that the gloss itself should be less suited to the imaginative needs of poetry. As it turns out, this is not the case. The gloss is concerned with religion, and emphasizes the already present Christian themes that the younger, more pantheistic Coleridge put into place, but other aspects, like the comments on the pursuing polar spirit, are too mystical to fit easily into a narrowly regimented Christian worldview.

The obliteration of mysticism, however, is not his objective. Instead of rules, this religion relies upon poetic inspiration, which leads to pure and deep love for all living things, as its foundation. Its exploration is accomplished by philosophy, which allows us to define this religion as just that—a spiritual statement with repercussions that affect and change the way we live our own lives. This religion is one with unanswered questions and a difficult and changeable structure, but also one that can be grasped, felt, and encompassed without doubt by the mind. Doubt, it seems, is not possible past the line. We may view the Mariner at the beginning of his tale as the skeptic, the individualist
without fear of god or nature, who shoots the albatross as a rejection of nature and the
love that it requires. His illusion of independence is quickly taken away from him,
however, and a series of forces work their will upon him with such speed and intensity
that by the tale's end he is humbled, withdrawn, and full of what can only be called holy
dread. Philosophy, like that we see in the gloss (or like that practiced in this essay), has
the power to direct our attention to this dread, and may even help us understand where it
comes from, but it does not and cannot overcome it.
Works Cited


