Compulsive repetition and "The ancient mariner": Coleridge's romantic "uncanny"

David Bunyan

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
With a woeful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale;
And then it left me free.

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

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me;
To him my tale I teach. (AM: 578–590)

Summary

In a discussion which focuses on the poem "The ancient mariner", this essay attempts speculatively to reconstruct some of the ideas that might have appeared in Coleridge's celebrated unwritten essay on the supernatural, had he ever completed it. This task is managed with the somewhat unexpected help of Freud, on the grounds that Freud's theories of dream-symbolism, and of neurotic symptoms as a "sign-system", are themselves the later beneficiaries of the theory of symbolism established by Coleridge and his romantic contemporaries. Freud's "uncanny" is compared with Coleridge's "supernatural", both to point out likenesses and to supplement Coleridge with Freud where appropriate. In particular, the central importance of early childhood and its experiences for both men is explored, in such a way as, hopefully, to shed new light on romantic notions of the sublime. Some of the goals of romantic poetry as such may become correspondingly clearer, as should also certain of the processes of signification typically employed, at least by Coleridge himself and those he influenced.

Opsomming

In 'n bespreking wat op die gedig "The ancient mariner" fokus, word in hierdie artikel spekulerend gepoog om sommige van die idees te rekonstrueer wat, indien hy dit voltooi het, sou kon verskyn het in Coleridge se gevierde ongeskrewe essay oor die bonatuurlike. Hierdie taak word haalbaar met die ietwat onverwagse hulp van Freud, met die onderliggende veronderstelling dat Freud se teorieë van droomsimbolisme en van neurotiese simptome as 'n "tekensisteem", self later kon profiteer van die formulering van simbolisme soos daargestel deur Coleridge en sy romantiese tydgenote. Freud se "uncanny" word vergelyk met Coleridge se "supernatural", sowel om ooreenkomste uit te wys as om Coleridge met Freud aan te vul waar dit toepaslik is. In besonder word die sentrale belangrikheid van albei se ervarings tydens hulle vroeë kinderjare op so 'n wyse ondersoek dat dit hopelik nuwe lig sal werp op die romantiese begrip van die sublime. Hierdeur sou sommige van die oogmerke van romantiese poësie as sodanig ooreenkomstig duideliker kon word; asook sekere van die prosesse van betekenisgewing wat op tipiese wyse aangewend word deur ten minste Coleridge self en diegene wat hy beïnvloed het.

The lines of the epigraph above are not really intended as a description of or dedication to those who compose theoretic essays on romantic poetry. They do, however, provide a point of entry to a fascinating task: the speculative re-composition – in our own terms, and from, inevitably, our later perspective – of some of the matter of a "lost" essay by Coleridge: the promised but never-completed treatise on the supernatural which he alluded to several times in the course of his literary career. The most prominent notice he gave of it is especially strategically placed. It ends the first book of *Biographia Literaria* and follows immediately upon the most famous lines of prose he ever wrote: the culminating definitions of Fancy and Imagination which close chapter XIII. The context seems thus to link the "supernatural" directly with the romantic vision of the creative Imagination:

> whatever more than this I shall think it fit to declare concerning the powers and privileges of the imagination in the present work 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".[1]

The project mentioned might consequently seem of the highest importance to the poet, equal in importance only to the separate metaphysical *Biographia,* for which it was intended to form a companion-piece. From both of these enterprises Coleridge was characteristically distracted, as we know, and they were never undertaken.

The real reasons for his dereliction of both tasks must have been much more than merely the pusillanimity for which he no doubt upbraided himself. One would guess that he visualized the final forms required with sufficient clarity to realize or at least half-realize that the support and corroboration to be derived from the critical theory, philosophy, psychology and science of his own day would still leave him with almost insurmountable problems of logical connection. These difficulties not even optimism, or a clear sense of the goal, or an intuitive feel that there *was* a path to be followed, would have been able to minimize. At least as regards the abandonment of the projected metaphysics, the alternative would have been a slavish imitation of Schelling. Such a course of (perhaps only partially acknowledged) imitation would have left Coleridge too exposed, in view of all the claims and promises he had made. It is easy enough to see the way in which he may have been the victim of his own publicity: in Coleridge's complex mind, it seems, to create too strong an expectation was actually to encourage defection from its fulfilment.

In the case at least of the essay on the supernatural, we are perhaps in a slightly more favourable position than he. Yet, if we are indeed so favourably placed, it is in no small part owing to the efforts of Coleridge and his European contemporaries of two centuries ago. As is sometimes acknowledged, the romantic interpretation of the symbol and of symbolism – of which Coleridge is at least the most articulate exponent – gave rise to two developing traditions. The first led through the literary *symbolistes* of France to a modern conception of the functioning of the image in poetry, drama and the novel; the second produced the conception of the dream-symbol, and of

the symbolic act as symptom, which underlies twentieth-century psychoanalytic practice. Our advantage is that some of the late fruits of these processes Coleridge helped to initiate may perhaps supply the necessary matter that he lacked, or, at least, may substitute for it.

Familiar as it is now, his new vision of the symbol deserves recapitulation here. Its best-known, though somewhat cryptic, definition runs:

> a Symbol is characterised by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative. (White, 1972: 30)

This admittedly somewhat grandiose account of symbolism has become newly controversial, in view of the exception taken to it by Paul de Man, among others, on the grounds that it posits a naive referentiality of meaning, by suggesting that the sign is inseparable from – in the sense of "transparent to" – what it designates. This objection is in my opinion based on a misunderstanding, as I think both the context and the practical applications of the passage reveal.

The symbol is inseparable from its meaning, in Coleridge's presentation of it, precisely because it does *not* "stand for" something apart from itself and its function in its context, as would be the case in allegory. The image chosen – let us say an albatross – comes to represent far less its dictionary signification – a type of bird – than it does an almost inexpressible focus of energies, a complex of associations, meanings and feelings given to it by its function within the totality which encases it. The image becomes, in a sense, an adumbration and expression of the whole "little universe" of the poem, and is only ever imperfectly divisible from it, if at all. It is able to operate in this superlinguistic way because the events of the poem serve progressively to emancipate it from its mundane signifying role, from its normal purpose in the everyday "time and space" of common discourse.

Thus understanding of a particular poetic symbol, properly so-called, is not likely to be exhausted by any single thread of interpretation that may be, however appositely, drawn out from it. As a condensation of semantic energies, it may support a wide range of meanings, without being any of these exclusively. Such meanings may range from the most particular to the most abstract, from the most "especial" to the most "general", and still be entirely reflective of the poem. To conflate an antinomy set up by Roland Barthes, the poem may thus be both "text" *and* "work"; but it is restricted from being *any* text because it is a work.

This situation, where an apparently arbitrary image gains a new range of meanings through its relation to some hidden supportive complex, is just that found in psychoanalysis, where pictorial and verbal elements from dreams and fantasies furnish unexpected significances in therapy. The totality in this case is the entire unconscious life of the dreamer, to whom the uninterpreted

image may often appear to possess an almost occult or chthonic power, until its emotional sources are laid bare.

That Coleridge effectually anticipated this psychological use of his concept of symbolism is indicated by such comments as the following from a letter of 1816. What is notable is that he identifies this special potential of the "symbol as sign" with its power of suspending reference, or of rendering reference *uncertain:*

> The truth is that images and thoughts possess a power in, and of themselves, independent of that act of the judgment or understanding by which we affirm or deny the existence of a reality correspondent to them. Such is the ordinary state of the mind in dreams. (Raine, 1950: 216)

Even external things could sometimes desert their usual functions and take on the strange quality that such dispossession of everyday meaning brings. But under such circumstances they do not signify *nothing,* but begin to draw instead upon deep inner sources of signification, that defy precise transcription:

> In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as of yonder moon dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking for,* a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing something new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim awakening of a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature. It is still interesting as a word – a symbol. It is *logos* the Creator, and the Evolver!
>
> (E.H. Coleridge, 1895: 136)

Though the symbols of dream and fantasy, and their interpretation in therapy, could be considered a somewhat restricted instance of what Coleridge meant, there is interest in the fact that Freud, round about 1919, made a notable repayment of the debt psychoanalysis owed to literature. The current of his thoughts turned in the direction of literary and aesthetic concerns on this occasion to help explain just those powerful but elusive feelings of overwhelming strangeness that can accompany the re-emergence of unconscious matter in symbolic form.

His immediate object of interest in his essay on "The uncanny" was the fantastic novella by E.T.A. Hoffmann called, in translation, "The sandman". He wished to propose a psychoanalytic justification for the macabre visions of disembodied eyes and of the animated female doll, Coppelia, which the piece contains. But these incidental facts need concern us less than the general comments on the nature of the "uncanny" or *"unheimlich"* which make up the body of his essay. It can be no coincidence that Freud was deeply occupied with two other important concepts in this and other writings at the time; his thoughts on the uncanny seem a by-product of his elaboration jointly of the repetition-compulsion and of the death-wish, both of which were made central in his *Beyond the pleasure principle,* also then in process of composition.

We will have later to explore the nature and connection of two at least of

these three psychological entities: the "uncanny" response and the repetition compulsion, in the belief that together they will throw some not always oblique light on the romantic supernatural of Coleridge, and consequently upon "The ancient mariner". But it would probably be best to begin by following Freud's initial steps through "The uncanny", in particular his efforts to define the rather difficult-to-translate German word *unheimlich* in a way which reveals the connection between the sense of eeriness, in literature and in life, and mental processes only partly within our conscious reach.

It is perhaps in itself significant that Freud begins with a long compilation of examples and quotations from German and other dictionaries, illustrating the almost sufficiently uncanny variety of different usages attaching to the word *unheimlich,* running to several pages. So uneasy and shifty is this term, as if taking some taint from what it most usually designates, that it turns finally into its opposite: the same sense, we learn, may in some contexts be conveyed by the term *heimlich,* its apparent contrary (XVII: 226). Not surprising, in this pervasive state of unease, that the psychologist E. Jentsch had in 1906 defined the "essential factor" in uncanniness as "intellectual uncertainty". Freud, however, after considering this suggestion sets it aside as "incomplete",[2] as staying somewhat too anxiously close to the etymological sense of "unhomely" or "unfamiliar".

Before we follow Freud's example, it is worth mentioning that Jentsch has at least the merit of placing the emphasis not on the special subject-matter concerned, but on the subjective disorientation produced by it: on the abysmal sense of losing one's way amid failing certainties; and it would be wise not to abandon the suggestion entirely, but to allow it as a contribution in what follows.

Freud is clearly more impressed by the definition from Schelling (yes, the very Schelling whose "dynamical philosophy" lies so extensively behind the metaphysics of the *Biographia*) which appears among the lexicographical material: "'*Unheimlich*' is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light" (XVII: 224).

Freud picks this out for special notice on the page following, indicating how amid the more humdrum and predictable instances, "Schelling says something which throws quite a new light on the concept . . . for which we were certainly not prepared" (XVII: 225). In fact, Schelling's suggestion is the thread Freud follows. In the analysis of Hoffmann's stories he highlights the appearance of the "double" or *Doppelgänger* in many of them, and cites this typical doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self (XVII: 234) in the fantasy tale as no more than a special instance of that mysterious phenomenon of apparently unaccountable "repetition", which begins now to be mentioned in the text. Yet such multiple repetitions themselves repeat the past; as a form of regression to the "primary narcissism" of childhood, when self and other were imperfectly distinguished: "when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people" (XVII: 236). Or so we learn:

> When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact

> of the "double" being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted – a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The "double" has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons. (XVII: 236)

Thus the primary, pre-linguistic world of earliest consciousness, unified to the point where distinctions even of self and other blur and disappear, may reappear for the adult mind in two utterly contradictory lights: as the epitome of all that is comforting and paradisal, as it perhaps once was; or, alternatively, as a source of horror and imminent self-collapse, and as a threat to the rational adult being. In its appealing aspect it is, according to Rosemary Jackson:

> a goal which lies behind all fantastic art, to a greater or lesser degree, the arrival at a point of absolute unity of self and other, subject and object, at a zero point of entropy. Jacques Lacan has identified the longing for this unity as the profoundest desire of the subject, referring to it as "an eternal and irreducible human desire . . . an eternal desire for the nonrelationship of zero, where identity is meaningless". (Jackson, 1981: 76–7)

Such was the prelinguistic world of common experience, as both Freud[3] and Lacan would have it. It would be hard to miss the connection between "the double" and the sense of doubling that attends the Lacanian "mirror stage", the phase of development which acts as a portal between "that" world and the growth of our social, rational selves (Jackson, 1981: 114).

To Freud, however, it is the negative aspect of such "recollections of early childhood" which stands uppermost. In the less relative world of the infant, too, the paradise of early existence may instantly change to hell, without bridge or intervention; so, according to Freud, an inexplicable state of repetition may tap us into the terrifying, not the holy, recollection of an earlier life. Thus repetition may in some circumstances of life itself "arouse an uncanny feeling, which further recalls the sense of helplessness experienced in some earlier states" (XVII: 237). He gives as example his own reminiscence of being lost in a strange town, and inadvertently returning time and again to the same street, from which he was intent on finding his way. Though Freud does not make it explicit, what is uncanny about this instance of repetition is its forcing of an *unwanted* unification upon its victim's disorientated mind: that the regressive state of unity comes unwarranted and unbidden, giving rise to primal panic and the "helpless" condition he describes, in which all effort of will and self-assertion seems annihilated by uncontrollable circumstance. The repetitious street begins, no doubt, to wear an air of almost deliberate malice, adding to our troubles the unwarranted dislocation of consciousness into external circumstances. That this last effect is the experience of Coleridge's "The ancient mariner" we need hardly be reminded.

In the case of the mariner, the inherent unity of the "One life" which governs the cosmos, the innate interdependence of consciousness and world, of subject and object, is a positive value he is eventually brought through experience to recognize, having initially disregarded it in the albatross' murder. However, Freud's personal attitude to the psychological equivalent

of this primal unity is far from accepting, though he recognizes its important influence among the usual contents of uncanny experience:

> Our analysis of instances of the uncanny has led us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe. This was characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject's narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that belief; by the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers, or *"mana"* .... It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive man, that none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything that now strikes us as "uncanny" fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic activity within us and bringing them to expression. (XVII: 240–1)

We perhaps begin to understand something about the ancient mariner's story which must have disquieted most readers in some degree: the lack of balance or justice in his fate as compared with what happens to his shipmates. Fickle they may be, but they are not after all responsible for the death of the bird, as he is; and yet he survives while they perish, and their bodies become the lifeless animated tools of "angelic spirits". They suffer, in other words, the reverse fate to that of Dr. Coppelius's doll; and such humiliation seems a retribution in excess of that exacted from the deed's real perpetrator. But the cause of the situation is that their whole condition, and that of the other characters, is entirely secondary to and dependent upon that of the mariner, even to life or death: it is his "ego" and hence his fate which is of exclusive narcissistic dominance in the narrative. For this reason even the wedding-guest cannot evade him. So, for this almost overbearing centrality of the mariner's own ego in his story, Freud's "primary narcissism" does offer some explanation.

In spite of some negative instances, it does begin to seem as if the precise feeling of uncanniness as such is not to be located in the *contents* of our early awareness of things, which seem in themselves frequently either neutral or positive, or conceivably so. The eeriness and unease must rather reside elsewhere, and be projected onto those things, thus colouring them. If these early memories are not simply forgotten, but *repressed* by our "grownup" consciousness, then it must have some vested interest in their non-appearance, which it may find threatening to the rational ordering of its daily life and sense of self-preservation. Hence it is not the memories, but their re-appearance, their repetition, which is the source of anxiety. So, in essence, runs Freud's explanation:

> If this is indeed the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* into its opposite, *das Unheimliche* (cf. 226); for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. (XVII: 241)

Hence the links with the "hidden" and brought "to light" of Schelling's

definition. As Freud neatly points out, in *unheimlich* "the prefix 'un' is the token of repression". Thus "everything that is uncanny . . . is something which is secretly familiar" and "has undergone repression and then returned from it" (XVII: 245).

It may be possible to put it differently and to locate the sense of supernatural eeriness in something more benign: a widening of consciousness to encompass new realities and new ways of seeing – which are really old ways of seeing which our rational consciousness had by its very development foreclosed from us. The dizziness and strangeness of the experience are the natural response to this necessary re-orientation of all our familiar conceptions to accommodate the new realities. Furthermore, it is possible that the "symbolic" mode of communication with ourselves (in Coleridge's sense) is not a more sophisticated, but a more *primitive* model of thought, the elements of which are imagistic, shifting, metamorphosing, all-embracing, imprecise – like the ingredients of dreams.

That the use of the "symbolic" mode may itself be enough to raise "uncanny" feelings in the mind, Coleridge's somewhat grandiose account of it in the *Lay sermons* is sufficient to reveal. Freud, however, was never able to sympathize with those who saw a positive value in the condition of "primary narcissism", with which "symbolism" in Coleridge's sense connects. Though Freud understood his friend Romain Rolland's account of the fundamental "religious emotions" to refer to this earlier state of being, as "a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" (XXI: 65), he sees in this fact even less reason for attraction to the condition. In this he is not at one with Rolland, whose memorable description of the feeling, as recounted by Freud, is markedly positive: the emotion concerned "he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, 'oceanic'" (XXXI: 64). We are reminded of the most important characteristic Coleridge attaches to the symbol: "the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal." If it is with language that the fine distinctions of time and place are enabled to enter our consciousness, there may still be uses of language which partially reflect a more wholistic prior condition, a condition not entirely in space and time, as we later come to differentiate these terms. As Jacques Lacan puts it, "what happens" in the unconscious "is inaccessible to contradiction, to spatio-temporal location and also to the function of time" (Lacan, 1987: 31); and, insofar as the oceanic condition is an unconscious stratum still present within us, it has the same right to these descriptions. If "indestructible desire escapes from time" (Lacan, 1987: 32), may this not also be the partial and relative effect of such a form of words as contains its own death-wish, so to speak, and which seeks to reflect as closely as possible those "unconscious desires" that spell its undoing? The suggestion is at least worth considering.

It should be admitted here at once that in suborning both Freud and Lacan to our purpose, we are reading both of them "against the grain", so to speak, the latter as much as the former. Lacan insists that "Freud's unconscious is not at all the romantic unconscious of imaginative creation" (Lacan, 1987:

24); we are partially justified in understanding as much of Lacan's own different "unconscious". For him, as for Freud, the "oceanic aspiration" is a "phantasy", and "illusion" (1987: 31); it gains reality only in terms of the "split" or "gap", the *surprise,* by which the unconscious opens up a hiatus in our speech and daily life, and so renders them contingent: "What is ontic in the function of the unconscious is the split through which that something, whose adventure in our field seems so short, is for a moment brought into the light of day" (1987: 31). Thus Lacan's unconscious can only properly be located in terms of negatives: "Ontically, then, the unconscious is the elusive" (1987: 32); it is what in our psychology *challenges* the ordinary assumptions we hold about Being (including its subordinate categories of Time and Space). The unconscious' further existence as any kind of unitary entity is problematic indeed.

But these scruples and disclaimers need not detain or deter us overparticularly. If it is the specifically romantic unconscious in which we are really interested here, then parallels and contrasts with other varieties have at least the merit of disclosing to us that form with which we *are* concerned. Nor does anything that has been said prevent us from noting points of coincidence which might suggest a greater identity of concern between the different understandings than their respective protagonists are always willing to acknowledge.

In the case of the ancient mariner, his embarkation and sea-voyage into new realities are certainly clarified for us if we take account of their "oceanic" dimension. Indeed, the mariner's voyage could be interpreted as a parable of the ego's painful discovery of the reality principle, in that the cosmic results of his mistreatment of the albatross impress upon him his relative subordination to the universe's more powerful ego, where once he supposed his own omnipotent and omnipresent. In the albatross he thus comes to some awareness of the demands of "other", an "other" still partially conceived of as a division in, and hence a projection of, the self. Insofar then, as it imitates the formation of the super-ego the poem becomes a universal parable of the arrival of guilt. (More reductively, one could suggest an identification between the albatross and the poet's father, whom, as a child of eight, he must have believed he had "killed" through his own celebrated naughtiness. The exile to "Christ's hospital" must, as "Frost at midnight" hints, have seemed an imprisonment and penance for this self-convicted Oedipal deed. From here began, perhaps, a pattern of "compulsive repetition" – of need, transgression, self-punishment and self-reproach – which was to last Coleridge throughout his life.[4])

But even if accepted this would be merely to scratch the surface of the range of meanings of the work, and would offer us only a little information about the functioning of the poem as an emotional event for the reader, for whose welfare we are here primarily concerned.

There is no doubt that the mariner's world is "oceanically" unified. Its "One life" shows itself not only in the Coppelia-like vivification of all its elements (sea, ship, winds, currents and celestial objects all seem actively involved in the mariner's fate) but also in the unifying poetic form of the

ballad itself, and in the evidence of the poet's own mind which is everywhere present: the animation provided in the similes, other images and figures of speech contribute, even more than could be considered "usual" in a poem, to a sense of a newly-living whole. "O! the one Life within us and abroad,/ Which meets all motions and becomes its soul,/ A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,/ Rhythm in all thought . . ." wrote Coleridge in 1828, six years before his death. The synaesthesia of these expressions reveals – still more than the union of poetic self and perceived world, of subject and object in the poem, which was the main article of his poetic creed – that malleable "shiftiness" of language, and, correspondingly, of the supposedly real entities of experience, which prepares the way to make unification possible.

It may be objected that we are here reducing what for Coleridge was a metaphysical and literary-critical reality into a mere reflection of a psychological phenomenon. If this is so (and I will not here venture to justify the contradiction) it is certain that both Wordsworth and Coleridge were entirely unselfconscious about the problem. That the child's consciousness, however derived, could represent a more *real* vision of the cosmos, one which metaphysics and even natural philosophy might thereafter serve to corroborate in all essentials, they hardly sought to question. Furthermore, this alternative but no less real way of seeing for them formed the fundamental basis of poetic vision. Its many unifications, reflective in small of what our poets took on philosophic faith to be the actual though unperceived universal one-ness, occupied the same relation to reality as did the innate wholeness of the true poem. As Coleridge could happily assert in one of his letters: "what the Globe is in Geography, *miniaturing* in order to *manifest* the Truth, such is a Poem to that Image of God, which we were created unto, and which still seeks that Unity, or Revelation of the *One* in and by the *Many* . . .." (1956: 545). The child's mind was recognized as both emblem and origin of that vision which could perceive the unities upon which both revelation and poetic form and vision depended: "Blest the Infant Babe," writes Wordsworth (Wordsworth 1954: 229f), indicating that his intention is not unlike that of Freud: "(For with my best conjecture I would trace/ Our Being's earthly progress,) . . ."

> blest the Babe,
> Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep
> Rocked on his Mother's breast, who with his soul
> Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!
> For him, in one dear Presence there exists
> A virtue which irradiates and exalts
> Objects through widest intercourse of sense;
> No outcast he, bewildered and depressed . . .
>
> (Wordsworth, 1954: 234–241)

We see already how in Wordsworth's case, there is a "difference in similarity" from that of Coleridge. Coleridge, in "The ancient mariner", is far more acutely conscious than Wordsworth, and at an earlier stage in their joint development than he, that the gates of Eden *do* close, and that the cost of being an outcast from this primal world may be considerable – all the more to

the degree one is empowered to "recollect" it. The difference in vision between the two poets must be accountable for by differences in their personalities, since their biographies are not dissimilar. At any rate, we see how for Wordsworth the contentment and security of childhood's primary narcissism, where the infant does not yet distinguish him or herself from mother and hence world, is not only a vital determining experience; it is also a supremely positive and profound one, capable of "irradiating and exalting" the external universe by imbuing it with humankind's deepest and most all-embracing emotion.

> Emphatically such a Being lives,
> Frail creature as he is, helpless as frail,
> An inmate of this active universe:
> For, feeling has to him imparted power
> That through the growing faculties of sense
> Doth like an agent of the one great Mind
> Create, creator and receiver both,
> Working but in alliance with the works
> Which it beholds – Such, verily, is the first
> Poetic spirit of our human life,
> By uniform control of after years,
> In most, abated or suppressed; in some,
> Through every change of growth and of decay,
> Pre-eminent till death.
>
> (Wordsworth, 1954: 252–265)

The "poetic spirit" itself is thus identified with the childhood condition here valorized; and it becomes the function of poetry by its superior abilities of metaphorical, rhythmic and tonal connection, by its powers of unification and of *surprise,* to awaken the over-rational mind to the child-vision within, in most "abated or sup- [or re-] pressed". The child-vision is superior, firstly, because it is prior in time: the child is, after all, the father of the man. Thus our later, more disparate consciousness is *built upon it.* And secondly, because there is a connection between those early states and our ethically best selves: for, after all, they correspond to a guiltless pre-Oedipal time, when our being was entirely and avidly founded upon unalloyed love. From this exalted state the universe at large, owing to the imperfect differentiations of this period, is not excluded. Since jealousy has not yet entered our awareness, no part of things need stand separate and unembraced by our passions.

For Wordsworth it is not only in poetry, but at certain privileged moments in life itself, that this unified vision returns. Sceptical as we sometimes may be tempted to be of the real ontological worth of such perceptions, still Wordsworth is able to

> deem not profitless those fleeting moods
> Of shadowy exaltation: not for this
> That they are kindred to our purer mind
> And intellectual life; but that the soul,
> Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
> Remembering not, retains an obscure sense

Of possible sublimity, whereto
With growing faculties she doth aspire,
With faculties still growing, feeling still
That whatsoever point they gain, they yet
Have something to pursue.

(Wordsworth, 1954: 312–322)

In Lacan's terminology, man is eternally bound to pursue "the Other", that seductive completing presence which seems to lie by its very nature always tauntingly beyond the reach of his linguistic rationality . . . and yet *that is all that he desires.* Like it or not, we are all implicated in the tensions and imperatives our primary state has set up for us.

We have here the powerful romantic vision of the poetic not as an elegant sophisticated diversion or entertainment but as a specially chosen vision and way of life. The sublime, as the ennobled (but, more frequently, amoral) state of consciousness, which promises the reader (or listener or viewer) the absorption into a higher mode of being and feeling in which the trappings of self may be temporarily discarded, comes to stand as the primary achievement and purpose of the poetic text. As in his table talk Coleridge once placed this quality in poetry – in contrast to the mere "majestic" or the "picturesque" – as the ultimate but almost unachievable stage of response: "Where neither whole nor parts, but unity, as boundless and endless *allness* – the sublime" (E.H. Coleridge, 1917: 443).

It is clear, then, that there must be a relation between the poetic sublime and the romantic uncanny, since the terms which most concern them appear so to overlap. We are probably justified in seeing them as differently placed versions of the same thing; though exactly what determines the difference remains still to be established. It is clear that in putting his emphasis on the supernatural rather than the sublime, Coleridge is showing a greater general perspicuity than Wordsworth, whose concern with the range of primal emotions is more limited and more exclusively monolithic. He is determined to believe in their fundamental benignity, whereas Coleridge is aware of a wider range of possible responses emanating from this source – including primal terror and unease, as the mariner's fate attests. We could say that Coleridge's mythic fable emanates from a slightly later or more comprehensive stage of early awareness than does Wordsworth's "intimations of immortality". We are thus no doubt right to perceive a greater range, even if a lesser intensity, attaching to the operations of the romantic "supernatural" in poetry.

Coleridge is certainly (perhaps even unfortunately) prophetic in "The ancient mariner", with regard to the future course of romanticism. For this work touches not only on the sublime and the uncanny, but – as we shall see – incorporates the repetition compulsion, too; more ominously – in the results of his transgression displaced upon the mariner's comrades, and active to a modified extent even upon the central figure himself – we may discern the lineaments of the death wish also. Now the death wish is in any case an ambivalent entity: it may imply nothing more harmful than the paradoxical desire of self for "dissolution into the organic" or into the primal unity. This

is, it seems to me, where Lacan most recognizes its functioning: as an effect of the frustrated desire for the Other. But that it may have more sinister implications too is revealed by the second and later generations of romantics, where the death wish begins to dominate, and does, I think, initiate the romantic decline; for example, its Keatsian need to cease upon the midnight with no pain; its *belles dames,* who represent the masochistic submission to the mother (or at least to the feminine) who seeks to overwhelm and re-absorb the emergent self. The "romantic agony" in all its manifestations begins to give increasing prominence to these destructive drives, to an extent which ordinary everyday rationality would soon cease to tolerate.

The "supernatural", then, is more emotionally diverse than the "sublime" (at least as Wordsworth conceived it); it adds to the Wordsworthian sublime more extensive possibilities of *terror* and *awe* as well as exaltation (though, to be fair, Wordsworth has these, too). But all these are still by-products of the process of alerting us to a "different" world, one that surrounds and contains our own limited, familiarized, post-linguistic consciousness, and thereby exposing us to the relativity of what we had thought all-inclusive. It tells us that a super-normal reality extends beyond our own – at least linguistically speaking; and that it is one of the functions of our metamorphic poetic devices to make that "other" reality partly visible to us through the poem.

As Coleridge himself described the first effects upon him of his encounter with Wordsworth's poetry, before he had ever met the man, it is clear what deeply impressed him was the poet's power to make vision *new.* He saw this especially in the poetry's dialectical mixture of accurate observation and "the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere* and with it the depth and height of the ideal world, around forms, incidents and situations of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dewdrops" (BL: 48–9).

We remember the joint plan of campaign for the *Lyrical ballads*: the poets were inspired by the symbol of a moonlit or sunset-hued landscape to the idea that the "imaginative" and the "actual" might be combined without sacrificing either. Hence two sorts of poems were planned, each sort to be the responsibility of one only of the two poets: "it was agreed that my endeavours," recalls Coleridge "should be directed to characters or persons supernatural, or at least romantic" (BL: 168). We see how closely these two terms are linked in Coleridge's mind: here the "romantic" appears as merely a modified or more edifying version of the stronger alternative.

> Mr Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling *analogous to the supernatural,* by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy and custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand. (BL: 169 [my emphasis])

These are somewhat more moderate claims than those I want to make or have

been making; or which Coleridge seemed to imply in his final words on the Imagination, a chapter, but also a volume ago. But what is recoverable from both contexts is the sense of a *renewal of vision* which Imagination may bring about, which may make the natural world appear to us as suddenly "uncanny". (We remember that Coleridge wished to distinguish between the supernatural proper and its close kin the *preternatural,* and planned to prefix an essay on this second form to "Christabel" if and when it were separately published. It was probably the uncanny in its more Wordsworthian variant, as the *radically unexpected,* that he had here most in mind.)

Let us remind ourselves of the operations of the creative Imagination, as Coleridge defined them: "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentialy *vital,* even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (BL: 167). Is there not sufficient here, then, to reveal to us the meaning of the romantic supernatural, as Coleridge intends it? It consists in, as Schelling suggested, a "bringing to light" of that which is "secret and hidden". What is most characteristically hidden from our everyday vision is the innate *unity* and *subjectivity* of the world of apparently discrete things we suppose external to our perception.This revelation – which is as much an inward communing with something we know but have forgotten – we may be surprised into, by a poem, in two ways: by a dissolving and diffusing of our ordinary linguistic expectations; or, in contrast, by a more-than-expected unification of sound, connotation, emotion and image, to create the effect of a new *composite* entity. All this is largely managed by the modification of linguistic reference through subjective choice and arrangement.

It may be objected that what has been suggested may still be applied as much to the sublime as to the uncanny, and yet neither case characterizes them specifically. Although the two are intimately linked, as Burke's disquisition had long before Coleridge's time revealed ("whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*" [Eliot, 1969: 35]), it must in the last analysis be differences of content that reveal the distinction between the two. In the case of the sublime, what seems most to impress us are extremes of dimensionality or scale: of power, strength, height, depth, vastness, intensity, perfection or all-embracingness. To continue with Burke: "In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it . . . hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity" (Eliot, 1969: 49, 54). What Burke describes is the overwhelming of the reason and its capacities by the employment of some means which must, even on early interpretations (cf. Longinus), have been symbolic or inspiring of human qualities of nobility, profundity or awesomeness, so suggesting extreme "dimensions of the mind". To Wordsworth and Coleridge, the most exalted condition possible must be our absorption into the All in its unified aspect.

The supernatural or uncanny emerges thus as a subdepartment of the

sublime, where instead of awe and veneration what is uppermost in the same circumstances is our sense of fear, unease, and half-pleasurable terror. It is a question of a different emphasis that distinguishes supernatural from sublime. Instead of scale, the stock properties of the occult, the gothic, or the animistic may be chosen to effect this end; but this is really no more than a decision about means. As Freud reveals, what is at the heart of the matter, what is the real source of disturbance with the uncanny, is that sense of self-recognition, that sense of our own involvement in the return of common yet forgotten psychological matter, which the features of the tale or poem – or perhaps the whole poem – serve to evoke.

Which brings us to the repetition compulsion. Here Freud is surely right in placing less emphasis upon the specific contents of the experience than upon the force of disturbance itself, and upon the particular character of the disorientation it compels upon our everyday perceptions and presuppositions.

Neil Hertz puts it this way: "The feeling of the uncanny would seem to be generated by being-reminded-of-the-repetition compulsion, not by being-reminded-of-whatever-it-is-that-is-repeated. It is the becoming aware of the process that is felt as eerie" (Harari, 1979: 296–321; 301). In other words, it is being tumbled willy-nilly into a situation of unexpected *return* – with its implications of timelessness in the very fact of recurrence, a parallel return on both behavioural and psychological levels – that is particularly vertiginous for the everyday rational and linguistic ordering of our lives.

Freud puts the matter perhaps most directly in *Beyond the pleasure principle*:

> It may be presumed that when people unfamiliar with analysis feel an obscure fear – a dread of rousing something that, so they feel, is better left sleeping – what they are afraid of is the emergence of this compulsion with its hint of possession by some daemonic power. (XVII: 36)

Though the work mentioned above provides the central occasion upon which Freud links – still perhaps somewhat loosely – the death wish and the compulsion to repeat, it is in "The uncanny" that this further element of uncanniness is drawn into the ambit of the other two:

> For it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a "compulsion to repeat" proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts – a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of small children; a compulsion, too, which is responsible for a part of the course taken by the analyses of neurotic patients. All these considerations prepare us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner "compulsion to repeat" is perceived as uncanny. (XVII: 238)

Though Freud clearly wishes us to link the compulsion which produces the repetition of the neurotic symptom with the sense of irrational "uncanniness" which so frequently attends its "inexplicable" return, we may feel some dissatisfaction at not being offered a clear account of the mechanism concerned. Why repeat? We still do not seem to possess an explanation. His

comment to the effect that the instincts – of whatever character – involve the repetition of behaviour, is only a sally in this direction. There is a world of difference between innate genetic behaviour patterns and neurotic symptoms, as Freud himself usually acknowledges.

However, the descriptions he offers of such recurrent gestures or actions are vivid enough:

> There are people in whose lives the same reactions are perpetually being repeated uncorrected, to their own detriment, or others who seem to be pursued by a relentless fate, though a closer investigation teaches us that they are unwittingly bringing this fate on themselves. In such cases we attribute a "daemonic" character to the compulsion to repeat. (Freud, 1973: 140)

That this offers us an adequate account, not only of the situation of the mariner subsequent to his voyage and return, but applies too to the addictive personality of his guilt-tormented creator, is evident enough. Yet the mariner's tale is sufficiently early in Coleridge's career to have been "uncannily" prophetic, as the poet himself seems to have recognized for the first time upon his trip to Malta in 1804.

In a special way here, the "timeless" character of the symbol might seem to have been vindicated. Coleridge once spoke of the way dreams may be thought "supernatural visitations", seeming by their prophetic power to possess a "character of divination. For ... who shall determine, to what extent this reproductive imagination, unsophisticated by the will, and undistracted by intrusions from the senses, may or may not be concentred and sublimed into foresight and presentiment?" (LS: 80–1). Foresight or insight, the dream-like fantasy of the mariner seems to have had emblematic status for Coleridge's life, as has often been noted.

With regard to the mechanism of the repetition compulsion, we are obliged, I think, to adopt the Lacanian recourse of seeing in it a special *relation to absence;* it thus becomes a type of signifier, created out of presence and absence, as is so much else in our linguistic and symbolic world. Signifier or symbol, the repetitive gesture is surely an attempt to staunch a gap, to foreclose upon an absence, through a device the futility of which must be evident even to the luckless obsessive himself. Yet he is helpless, compelled by powers that are larger than his sense of self or of reality, for the origin of the "gap", the trauma, is frequently to be found in an area of his past which precedes the full formation of these senses.

One is probably not far from the mark in seeing the entire power of the Other – as object of desire – temporarily dislocated into the neurotic symptom, the vain attempt to re-unify a fundamental level of experience divided by the traumatic or the repressed ... as the unitary consciousness of primary narcissism is split into self and other, wounded by the need to speak. The mariner must speak and continue speaking, like the poet, but such speech will not bring the promised surcease from the "uncanny" source that prompts it, as even he knows.

Such an account may seem inflated until we consider examples within the experience of us all, for the "compulsion to repeat" afflicts most of us through

the regressive obsessionality of what is popularly called being "in love". The rejected or fixated lover who strains his or her sympathetic friend's patience by the constant return of their conversation to a fixed point, in spite of the complete exhaustion of the beloved theme, is a pitifully familiar instance. The excruciating incapacity for being deterred from her object which afflicts the besotted Helena in *A midsummer night's dream;* or the point when Lear, in a moment of dire black comedy, can see in the pitiful blind Gloucester only a "Goneril with a white beard"; both are evidences of the compulsion to make whole by speech or act what resolutely refuses to be healed.

The idea that neurotic repetition is a kind of speech might prompt us to certain insights about the nature and function of repetition as a figurative device or rhetorical trope – at least, perhaps, in some romantic verse. Neil Hertz raises the question in the reverse direction when he asks whether the symptomatic gestures or "visible signs of desire are 'like' figures of speech?" (Hertz, 1979: 300). What we, in turn, wish to enquire is whether repetition and other figures may not sometimes function as "symbols" in Coleridge's sense, or as apparently contentless and hence simply formal equivalents of such symbols. His mention of the "referenceless" character of the symbols of dreams, quoted earlier in this essay, could perhaps open the way for such an understanding.

Repetition may, of course, appear in many forms. It is customarily understood as a device for emphasis, and often is – but perhaps not always or exclusively. Here we may include not only the repetition of words, phrases, lines, refrains and choral stanzas, but the formal inward repetitions that constitute rhyme and rhythm. What we mostly see is a complex play with our expectations: a texture of real presences and of presences implied or accentuated by absence, operating both on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. It begins, indeed, to look as if verse is built up largely as a structure of repetitions and their absences.

The Coleridgean explanation of all this would surely be its linking of "sameness with difference" in the poem: of "a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order"; as part of the way a poet "diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination" (BL: 174). Coleridge of course traces metre originally to "the balance in the mind . . . which strives to hold in check the workings of passion" (BL: 206). And, "as intimately connected with this, if not the same argument in a more general form, I adduce the high spiritual instinct of the human being impelling us to seek unity by harmonious adjustment, and thus establishing the principle that all the parts of an organized whole must be assimilated to the more important and essential parts" (BL: 211). What this amounts to is that language, figures of speech, and metre all share the same function – precisely that of distinguishing the poem from the language of "real men" (this is the exact cause and issue of Coleridge's quarrel with Wordsworth's theory, in the *Biographia*). The essential fact is: "I write in metre because I am about to use a language different from that of prose" (BL: 209). His final position is thus diametrically

opposed to that Wordsworth seems to defend: "in every import of the word *essential* which would not here involve a mere truism, there may be, is and ought to be, an essential difference between the language of prose and of metrical composition" (BL: 212).

Poetry is setting itself up as different in *form* from prose strategically to demarcate for itself a difference in *function*. Prose is appropriate enough for a prose way of looking at the world; but there is a specifically poetic vision – perhaps pre-linguistic in character – which demands the reshaping of language to its purposes, insofar as language may serve them at all. The principal character of this different way of seeing is its unity, which the repetitions in the form and metre may serve to represent to us.

The *difference* between the figure of speech or trope and the customary patterns of prose is *in itself* one of its most important rhetorical effects. That difference acts as a *challenge* to our adult, rational, prose-centred existence. The fact that the forms of poetry involve the recurrent more than the forms of prose, by itself constitutes a device to open up semantic uncertainty, to dispel stuffiness, to alert us to what is threadbare about our ways of seeing. It is thus rhetorical in a sense somewhat like that outlined by Paul de Man in his "Semiology and rhetoric". De Man sees, for example, the ordinary question become rhetorical

> not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and, on the other hand, a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely contradictory) prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. And although it would perhaps be somewhat remote from common usage, I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself. (Harari, 1979: 121–140; 129–30)

As is well-known, as a definition of *literature* this formula becomes problematic when confronted with the essay, the biography, the treatise, and even the novel. But it may have something to say about the common, formal aspect of romantic poetry.

The semantic splitting de Man talks of need not be followed as far as direct contradiction. Yet, as we have already seen, a poem like *The ancient mariner* cannot be made to signify in the way we suppose normal with our ordinary prose or speech communications. We and many others have teased out from the poem already a number of readings, all of which have equal right to our attention; there is no reason to believe they are exhaustive. Such polysemy extends to the very frame of the mariner's tale, which seems designed to spread the possibilities of its signification. As Frances Ferguson notes, both the epigraph and the prose gloss actually serve to divide the ground from which we approach the work, for their separate registers and frames of reference frequently disagree: "while the persona of the Gloss is that of a seventeenth-century editor who lays claim to sorting out the medieval tale, the author of the epigraph, his contemporary, merely provides us with a record of his lack of certainty" (Ferguson, 1987: 258). In the course of the narrative, as has often been noted, the gloss and the verses sometimes

actually exchange functions; the gloss becomes more metaphorical or "supernatural", the corresponding verses more literal and prosaic. The effect of the supernatural tale so presented is constantly to undermine our reading certainties to special and particular ends; and such – or so I have been arguing – is what the term "supernatural" in this context should lead us to expect.

By way of illustration, let us list some of those "readings" we have had cause to suggest or allude to or imply in the course of this study. There is the poem as emblem and prophecy of the poet's personal life, with his constant murder of his "better self" within, and consequent self-punishment; there is the parable of his own problematic early psychic experience; there is the universal myth of early consciousness and selfhood afloat on the sea of life and encountering reality, with the interplay of conscious and unconscious forces that govern our world unbeknown to us, conditioning our lives; there is the unresolved conflict or conflation of the mariner's hope for Christian solace and an animistically-conceived universe, itself with powers of life and retribution. Never to be unregarded, there is Robert Penn Warren's metaphysical "One life"[5] interpretation of the nineteen-forties, seeing a cosmic interdependence of living things which the mariner disturbs by one thoughtless act of circumscribed desecration, akin to the independent operations of irresponsible rationality. Most important for our purposes, there is the "allegory" of poetic creativity and the poet's relation to his own unconscious sources of inspiration, which he must learn to accept and bless, even though they may be apparently alien, the equivalent of water-snakes and a "thousand thousand slimy things" that "crawl with legs/ Upon the slimy sea" (AM: 238; 125–6). Only by such acceptance of what is within himself may he hope to turn his avenging demons into "angelic spirits". Even so, he is a forever tainted being, who – although (in the words of "Kubla Khan") he has fed on "honey-dew ... And drunk the milk of Paradise" – is compelled by that knowledge which is within him to the endless varied repetitions of its inward matter in poetic form, each variation of which offers only temporary surcease of his desire for the Other he is denied, by the fact of his adulthood.

The "holy dread" the wedding-guest feels for the uncanny mariner may be accounted for by his own self-recognition in the figure: after all, he becomes a "sadder and a wiser man" through this inevitable acquaintance. There can be little doubt that the mariner and the wedding-guest are projections of one and the same consciousness, as is customary in dreams. It is the wedding-guest, as "hostage" to the everyday world of the wedding-feast (upon which he ultimately turns his back) who is constrained to listen to this compulsive repetition of the voice of his own deepest being, "like a three years' child" (AM: 15). The wedding-feast awaits him, its festivity and gaiety echo as a sounding backdrop almost within his reach: but this expression of adult procreative sexuality and future parental responsibility would mean, by his accepting a more everyday form of "fertility", a final closing of the doors upon the child within – whose torments, terrors, and transcendent vision are the source of the uncanny power which animates his creative will ... or, at least, that of the mariner, or else the poet.

What the mariner *repeats,* of course, is the poem we hear for the first time.

The repetition compulsion, it appears, gives rise to the interpretation compulsion: that attempt to domesticate a text or trauma by repeating it over in one's own voice; just as the poem is an effort to "repeat" its source of inward meaning in its own colours (we see signs of this, for example, in the mariner's "Christianizing" of his own text). That neither compulsion can, in the nature of things, be successful in its initial purpose, will not bring the process to an end; for we are compelled to continue, to fill the widening gaps in being. It is perhaps only that we inevitably introduce our own particular brand of "sameness with difference", and so produce what we did not think to, which gives independent value to our efforts.

I have left out of my list of interpretations, of course, the wild notion that *The ancient mariner* is a literary ballad, in imitation of common and archaic oral forms, about a sea-dog who endures an inconveniently disturbed voyage. But I think I have said enough to illustrate the capacity of the "symbol" (whether linguistic feature or complete work) to confound our ordinary semantic expectations. Our interpretations range from the Especial to the General to the Universal, yet the end is not in sight, simply because – as is not the case with allegory – our references cannot be what the symbol *is*. It is its capacity for interpreting *us* which is the most uncanny thing about it. Yet the romantics were not inclined to savour vertiginous linguistic abysses for their own sake. For them the defeat by poetry of our ordinary referential language was no more than a prelude to a wider and more inclusive vision. Poetry, by its simple existence, was also that form best equipped to provide the most comprehensive vision possible to linguistic man, yet still remain within the fold of language; hence its "uncanny" irreducibility, its range of potential reference. As Coleridge "repeated" in his epigraph from Burnett: "I can easily believe that there are more invisible than visible Beings in the Universe." The same is true of meanings.

I close with a translation of the epigraph itself, in this case only slightly abridged to highlight a meaning or range of meanings which, it may be, were not as apparent to the reader before this essay. As I have already confessed, there is no reason to suppose they are exhaustive.

> I believe easily that there are more invisible than visible beings in the universe .... The human mind has always circled about the knowledge of these things but has never reached it. Still it is undeniably desirable to contemplate in the mind, as it were in a picture, the image of a greater and better world: lest the mind, accustomed to the small details of daily life, becomes contracted and sinks entirely into trivial thoughts ....[6]

Notes

1. Cf. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria.* In: Watson (1975: 167). Hence BL.
2. Cf. "The uncanny" *(Das Unheimliche).* In: *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. XVII (1955: 221). Hereafter works from this edition will be referred to by the volume number.
3. Cf. "Civilisation and its discontents". In: *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. XXI (1961: 64 ff.). Hence XXI.

4. David Beres in 1952 suggested a link between the albatross and – perhaps more interestingly – the water snakes, and Coleridge's recollection of a "phallic mother". His paper was called "A dream, a vision, and a poem"; it is referred to and discussed by D.W. Harding in "The theme of 'The ancient mariner'" in Coburn (1967: 57–64).
5. The essay is, of course, "A poem of pure imagination" variously reprinted but to be found in *Selected essays* (Warren, 1966: 198–305). That its interpretation is not absolutely incompatible with one which presents the albatross as a "signifier", detached from its signifying context by the mariner's intellect, will be evident enough.
6. Translated in *Coleridge, selected poetry and prose.* Cf. Schieder (1972: 643–5).

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