‘My Soul in Agony’: the Terrors of Subjectivity in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

This chapter bases its central argument on the fact that ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is different in type rather than degree when compared to the standard eighteenth-century terror-sublime. We may see this by beginning with obscurity. Obscurity had an established affinity with the sublime, as we find, for example, in Burke’s preference for perceptions that were dim, indeterminate or irregular. However, in turning to Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ it seems as if we confront a deeper and more disturbing sense of obscurity, obscurity that threatens to outstrip the bounds of eighteenth-century taste altogether. This is particularly evident in perhaps the most famous judgement on the text, Robert Southey’s pronouncement that it was ‘a Dutch attempt at German sublimity’. Redoubling the associations of excess and irrationality associated with German literature, Southey measures the poem not just fundamentally incoherent, but exorbitantly so. We might read the phrase as a kind of self-multiplying and self-deepening tautology: more obscure (Dutch) than obscure (German) obscurity (sublimity). Yet as we see in a fulsome review by John Gibson Lockhart for Blackwood’s Magazine in 1819, this deep-lying sense of the strange was for others precisely the source of its greatness:

it is a poem to be felt, cherished, mused upon, not to be talked about, not capable of being described, analyzed, or criticised. It is the wildest of all the creations of genius … its images have the beauty, the grandeur, the incoherence of some mighty vision. The loveliness and the terror glide before us in turns.

In this chapter, I argue that the poem’s terrors are indeed more disturbing and more obscure (in kind, rather than degree) than anything theorised
in conventional eighteenth-century thought, particularly Burke. There is a definite reason for this: because the ‘Rime’ shifts the terrors from outside a perceiving subject, as they are in Burke and indeed Coleridge’s Hartleian schema, and relocates them inside the subject. The psychological discourse that Burke and others use to regulate, define and understand the experience of the sublime is itself overrun by the sublime.

As a result, the subject terrifies itself, it struggles to comprehend itself, it finds an abyss within. It becomes sublime. To trace the emergence of this distinctive new turn in the terror-sublime, I believe that one needs to interrogate Coleridge’s shifting theological positions on original sin, continuing the analysis of guilt and evil that was begun in the previous chapter. For although the haunted, guilty subjectivity that dominates Coleridge’s poem is strikingly contemporary in one way – and I shall draw out some contemporary resonances at the end of the chapter – it is also deeply rooted in a Christian thought of ethics, evil and theodicy. Our interpretation thus also, as it moves forward, departs from a modern critical consensus which I believe has persistently misidentified a Christian reading of the poem as implying or demanding its explicability and harmony. I would hold that Coleridge’s religious thought is more disturbing, more complex and more profound.

The cross and the albatross: Christianity, irrationality and ethics

Given the characteristic reactions of Lockhart and Southey, the sublimity of the ‘Rime’ lies with its ability to compel and disturb in the same movement, possibly to excess. What is the root cause of this obscurity or unintelligibility, this ‘Dutching’ of the terror-sublime, that threatens to move the poem out of the orbit of eighteenth-century taste – but in doing so also makes it utterly singular? Here, I think our analysis of the earlier poem, ‘The Destiny of Nations’, marries very well with existing critical discussion of the ‘Rime’. In the previous chapter, I argued that Coleridge departed from Burke by making sympathy (feeling-with-others or mediated feeling) rather than self-preservation (the immediacy of physiological stimulation) central to his terror-sublime: in short, he made it ethical. This seems an appropriate point of departure, because one of the dominant issues in critical debates about the ‘Rime’ has always been the coherence or otherwise of its ethical signification. In reviewing a long-running debate on the poem, I am going to show that the sense of inscrutability that permeates the poem’s ‘loveliness and terror’ is rooted in the inability