THE ANCIENT MARINER, GOD, AND ANIMALS

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CRITICISM

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Insufficient attention has been paid to the implications of the animal rights movement for religion. Perhaps the most important of these implications is that if we avoid absolutizing humanity's differences from other species we can more easily see the really infinite difference, that between any animal or transitory creature and the Everlasting.[1] This insight is not new, however, in that it was given sublime expression as long ago as 1798 (if not before, say in the life of St. Francis of Assisi) in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's great poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Despite the fact that non-human animals loom large in the poem, none of the many interpreters of the work has analyzed it as a poem primarily, or even largely, about non-human animals. I will attempt such a task here in this short article in the hope not only that we will better understand one of the greatest poems ever written, and surely the greatest dealing largely with non-human animals, but also that such understanding will enhance discussion of the relationship between non-human animals and religion.

The poem opens with the ancient mariner interrupting a wedding guest so as to tell the guest about the mariner's incredible voyage, which had occurred a long time before. As is well known, the mariner's ship was blown south into polar waters; what has not been noticed is that this voyage consisted in an escape from animality, a trip to a region where no "shapes of men nor beasts were to be found" (my emphasis). Instead, the ice itself took on animate shape and "roared and howled" like wild beasts. Salvation from this abyss was offered by the only real non-human animal left, an albatross, whose symbolism of Christ is transparent:

As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.

The sailors took the rise of a south wind, which blew the ship away from polar waters, as being caused by the albatross's power. But once out of danger, the ancient mariner curiously shot and killed the albatross, fittingly enough with a cross-bow.

The murder of this bird was "a hellish thing," not least because, as Jesus himself is recorded to have said, God cares even for the fall of a sparrow (Matthew 10:28). The abandonment of nature by God was no more palatable to a thinker like Coleridge than

was pantheism. In the following passage from one of Coleridge's letters, he makes it clear that he is opposed not only to the totaliter aliter conception of God as totally other from the natural world, on the one hand, but also to pantheism and ancient nature theism (e.g., Stoicism), on the other. He says:

Moderns [Deists and Cartesian rationalists] make the Ho theos [God] as an hypothetical Watch-maker, and degrade the to theion [divine things] into a piece of Clock-Work--they live without God in the world. The ancients are (at least some of them) chargeable with the contrary extreme--they take the to theion to the omission of the Ho theos, and make the world the total God. True philosophy begins with the to theion in order to end in the Ho theos. . . . All false systems may be reduced into these two genera--instead of the cosmos en theoi [the world in God] the former assumes a theos exo tou cosmou [God outside the world], the latter a theos en cosmoi [God in the world]. In the one the World limits God, in the other it comprehends him. Now the falsehood of both may be taught.[2]

That is, Coleridge is a believer neither in a wholly transcendent God nor in a pantheistic God; he is a panentheist: one who believes that all is in God in that God includes the world through divine knowledge of, and care for, all the creatures in the world. It should now be somewhat clear that the death of the albatross is religiously bothersome not only because the albatross is a symbol for something else (e.g., Christ), but also because the albatross is a sentient being in its own right.

Despite the murder of the albatross, the ancient mariner became popular with his crew. Once out of the frigid zone, the continued presence of the albatross meant constant fog and mist; the killing of the bird brought the sun out again. But the killing of the albatross could only be rationalized by the ancient mariner by universalizing his hatred of animals; or perhaps this is why he killed the bird in the first place: to show his absolute superiority to the slimy animals, to show that his species was superior to all the other rotting creatures:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
 That ever this should be!
 Yes, slimy things did crawl with legs
 Upon the slimy sea.

As Isaac Bashevis Singer has written--largely because the ancient mariner's attitude toward non-human animals is not as exotic as we might suppose--for the non-human animals the earth is an eternal Treblinka.[3]

The albatross, however, unlike other slaughtered animals, was avenged. The return of the sun brought a deathly drought:

Water, water, every where,
 And all the boards did shrink;
 Water, water, every where,
 Nor any drop to drink.

The fickle crew then belittled the ancient mariner in the most cruel way imaginable: he had to wear animality when the albatross itself became his garb:

Instead of the cross, the Albatross
 About my neck was hung.

The effect was to force the ancient mariner to confront his primitivism face to face, not unlike Thoreau's implication--connected with his awareness of the practice of anthropophagy in antiquity--that meat-eaters should be able to eat even a fried rat.[4] The ancient mariner's atavism is exemplified when he says:

With throats unslaked, with black lips
 baked,
 We could nor laugh nor wail:
 Through utter drought all dumb we stood!
 I bit my arm, I sucked the blood, . . .
 And cried, a sail! a sail!

Yet vampirism did not relieve the ancient mariner's speciesism in that he resented the continued existence of non-human animals after his crew had died of thirst, and he despised his own existence because he continued to live like the other animals:

The many men, so beautiful!
 And they all dead, did lie:
 And a thousand thousand slimy things
 Lived on; and so did I.

The ancient mariner's prayers were not efficacious until the severed link with God's creatures was reestablished, not until the

ancient mariner underwent a metanoia, a change of heart with respect to non-human animals and his own animality. The albatross fell off his neck only when he realized that there was no shame in being so closely tied to an animal nature. Familiarity does not always breed contempt. Thoreau puts the point well:

That in which men differ from brute beasts is a thing very inconsiderable; the common herd lose it very soon; superior men preserve it carefully.[5]

The ancient mariner had become a superior human being. To remove the albatross from his neck was to relieve the burden of speciesism. With equanimity he:

. . . watched the water snakes:
 They moved in tracks of shining white,
 And when they reared, the elfish light
 Fell off in hoary flakes. . . .
 I watched their rich attire. . . .
 O happy living things! no tongue
 Their beauty might declare:
 A spring of love gushed from my heart,
 And I blessed them unaware.
 (my emphasis)

Only at this point was the ancient mariner prepared to understand Christianity. That is, as in Tolstoy, bringing non-human animals within the sphere of human agape is not supererogatory but a duty; it is the first step toward a non-violent life.[6]

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In an earlier period of Christianity's history, human beings achieved a cantilevering of meaning by comparing themselves to creatures slightly higher than they on the scale of being.[7] The ancient mariner reached the same end as medieval angelology, however, by examining beings slightly different from human beings, yet these non-human beings are somewhat angelic in their own right. The point is that all sentient life makes a difference to the divine life, which, if it is the greatest conceivable life, could not be indifferent to the pleasures and pains of creatures:

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the sky-lark sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seemed to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning!
And now 'twas like all instruments,
Now like a lonely flute;
And now it is an angel's song,
That makes the heavens be mute.

The heavens do not talk, but listen, when a bird sings. That excellent receptivity is just as much a property of divine supremacy as excellent activity.[8] Hence we can understand why the ancient mariner's impetuous, cruel activity against the innocent passivity of the albatross should be anathema to religion. The spirit sent to punish the ancient mariner asks:

"Is it he?" quoth one, "Is this the man?
By Him who died on cross,
With his cruel bow he laid full low
The harmless albatross."

This divine daemon, however,

Loved the bird that loved the man
Who shot him with his bow.

The ancient mariner's punishment was humane: his lot, quite simply, was to wander forever and tell his story. With confidence he could greet the woodland hermit, God's agent of forgiveness. The hermit prevented the ancient mariner from moving to the other extreme from his previous speciesism. That is, the ancient mariner avoided a syrupy sentimentalism with respect to non-human animals. Upon seeing the warped planks and the sered sails of a ship of death, the hermit explains:

I never saw aught like to them,

Unless perchance it were
Brown skeletons of leaves that lag
My forest brook along;
When the ivy-tod is heavy with snow.
And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,
That eats the she-wolf's young.

Some non-human animals are carnivores, but they are not cruel. Such is the price human beings must pay for their rationality, which in some ways makes them superior to animals, in other ways inferior. God is superior to the doing of evil (even if God can--must--feel it when it is inflicted on others), non-human animals inferior to it. The burden of conscience is peculiarly human. Hence the ancient mariner confesses regarding his polar voyage:

O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been
Alone on a wide, wide sea:
So lonely 'twas, that God himself
Scarce seemed there to be.

At least one reason why God seemed absent in this region was the fact that there were hardly any animals there to care for.

The effect of this rime on the wedding guest was the one Coleridge no doubt intended for the readers of his poem:

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

Wiser, if my interpretation is allowable, because of a more profound understanding of the religious nature of the all-inclusive whole of things, and because of the widened scope of his agape. Sadder, again if my interpretation makes sense, not only because of the death of the albatross and the crew members, but also because of the suffering inflicted on all of the noble and the "slimy" creatures in this world not immortalized in verse. As Coleridge's great friend William Wordsworth put it: "We murder to dissect." [9] And to eat, keep warm, entertain ourselves, and to show that we are made in God's image--thereby showing that we understand neither God nor mimesis.

Have previous critics of Coleridge ever done justice to these famous lines toward the end of the poem, lines which constitute the moral to the story?:

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell

To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
 He prayeth well, who loveth well
 Both man and bird and beast.
 He prayeth best, who loveth best
 All things both great and small;
 For the dear God who loveth us,
 He made and loveth all.

I think not.

Notes

1. On religion and animals, see Charles R. Magel, A Bibliography on Animal Rights and Related Matters (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), especially pp. 163-86. After the appearance of this bibliography, several interesting studies of the relationship between Judaism and animals have appeared. Also, see my "The Jesuits and the Zoophilists, Again," forthcoming in the Irish Theological Quarterly, and Not Even a Sparrow Falls: Hartshorne, God, and Animals, forthcoming.

2. Quoted in Thomas McFarland, Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 322. A fuller treatment than the one I have given in this article of the relationships among these different sorts of theism can be found in my "McFarland, Pantheism, and Panentheism," forthcoming. Further, I should note that the edition of the poem I am using is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), although many other editions, with only minor differences among them, are easy to find, as in the Norton anthology.

3. See Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Letter Writer," in The Seance and Other Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968).

4. See Robert Epstein, "A Benefactor of His Race: Thoreau's 'Higher Laws' and the Heroics of Vegetarianism," Between the Species 1 (Summer, 1985), pp. 23-8, and Chapter Four of my Thoreau and the Platonist (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming in 1986). For Thoreau's own words, see Walden, ed. by J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 210, 215-7.

5. Walden, p. 219.

6. Leo Tolstoy, "The First Step," in

Recollections and Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

7. See the magisterial study by James Collins, The Thomistic Philosophy of the Angels (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947).

8. See my "Polar Equality in Dipolar Theism," forthcoming in The Modern Schoolman.

9. William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," in Poetical Works (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), also found in the Norton anthology.

SOMETIMES MY SHADOW

should cast me
 beyond the place of the placid beast
 carnivore, omnivore
 unperturbed by imaginings
 to a world of bloodless blades
 quiet rooted things

a world where the only
 fuel for life is light
 and flesh part of a nightmare
 nature never meant to dream
 yet the shadow throws the self behind
 in the mud

it can neither love nor leave
 where rare feelings flutter and die
 like bright moths with mock eyes
 on sightless wings
 sentiments evolving like orchids
 amid the welter of carnal things

KRISTIN ARONSON