

WORKING ON TEXTS

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Reading Literature Critically

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Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton

Working on Texts: Reading Literature Critically

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Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton, Florida • USA

2012

ISBN-10: 1-61233-106-8

ISBN-13: 978-1-61233-106-5

www.universal-publishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Terrinoni, Enrico, 1976-

Working on texts : reading literature critically / Enrico Terrinoni.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-61233-106-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 1-61233-106-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. English literature--Criticism, Textual. 2. American poetry--Criticism, Textual. I. Title.

PR65.T48T47 2012

820.9--dc23

2012013858

*Although you hide in the ebb and flow
Of the pale tide when the moon has set,
The people of coming days will know
About the casting out of my net...*

William Butler Yeats

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PREFACE

Reading Literature Critically

If reading is inevitably always an experiment, reading literary masterpieces gains one access to a linguistic and semiotic universe that baffles hermeneutic authority, as well as any attempt to propose definitive interpretations. What is good about reading is that it is simultaneously a statement of subjectivity and recognition of the other as a different interpreter of the same signs. Every reading is therefore always provisional. No professor or expert can give us ultimate truths about how to read a text and why. When facing the language of literature, all certainties are easily silenced by the very arbitrariness of language. This happens regardless of if we feel our interpretations to be utterly sincere and truthful, when they are ultimately only intimate. Interpretation relies massively on the personal sphere and generally does not need verification. However, it is still subject to judgement, and other people's judgements of how we read a text are just as relevant as ours, and we need to take account of them.

The arbitrary nature of signs is easily revealed to us readers whenever we employ them to express ourselves, let alone to express ourselves "poetically". If no one will ever be in a position to say a definitive word about what we should make of a text where a literary text is concerned the fluidity of interpretation is at its best. Literary language can be perceived to be very direct and intimate, and poetry and confessions can have the same perception. However, in general, when we deal with the literary, what seems like intimacy is actually an impression of it.

Of all the examples of textuality, poetry is probably the linguistic domain where language more often ceases to be communicative; to approach the venerable status of something that is said to be, so to speak, "pure form." How does poetry convey messages then? Can we speak of messages at all when we deal with poetry? Jakobson invented the notion of poetic function explaining that it focuses on the

message, but one wonders whether his idea of message could ever be taken to be the core of the communicative process as we know it.

Rather, Jakobson's poetic function revolves around an impression of form, implicitly undermining all possible attempts at content-focused interpretations. What Jakobson intends by employing the term "message" has little to do with our way of using it in today's communicative contexts. It is probably even less linked to the way that many teachers attempt to explicate poetry to students. I would argue that to study the message in literature in general and specifically in poetry, has to be a rather curious compromise between formalist interpretations and communicative functional approaches.

To reduce and confine poetry to the domain of form is in fact to exclude many of our most moving poems from the poetic tradition, such as Whitman's for example. Whitman's seemingly naïve equation between men and books in *Democratic Vistas* may well be a little too much in terms of personalizing poetry to turn it into a communicative affair, but as his poems on Lincoln show only too well, to disregard the force and motivation of the political message conveyed through poetry is to forget the very origin of the genre, as well as its social function. Poetry needs to be seen as what ultimately enables us to give life to cultural memory, within the flexible borders of a community. Accordingly, poetic language might look both like the container and the content of what we know as poetry. As such, it may also dutifully be employed to demonstrate that culture is language, as well as that language *is* culture, as many have argued in recent years.

But in an attempt to ask how poetry can be read and analysed, let alone taught, as well as what we should read in poetry, let us briefly return to reading as a hermeneutic process based on the idea that language is an interface between the subtextual – and pretextual, if you like – realm and universe of the reader, that is, the one who brings poetry to life. A precondition to the act of reading as a creative process is the awareness that we will always be quite uncertain as to what can or cannot be found in texts. Interpretation is in fact a mark of our freedom, and all original readings are in a way subversive and provocative. They deliberately and continuously mock authority with gusto and audacity.

And yet one can still try to demonstrate the ways in which a literary text can be read, what its striking features are, as well as how it is related to traditions and canons. This is what good professors generally do in class. They do not sell unquestionable truths as pardon-

ers sell indulgences. On the contrary, their job should be to question authoritative views in order to critically provoke their students.

Criticism, to some extent, has to imply some kind of a subversive attitude, and the game of literature is useful working territory for attempting to change its possible worlds. In this sense, literature, or rather reading, can teach us an important lesson in how to behave in the outside world. Our own approach to external reality is often mirrored in the ways in which we approach the realm of fiction. To read critically is to resist the temptation of yielding to interpretations that come from the above. To interpret is always an act of revolt.

For all of these reasons – and others that the indulgent reader will hopefully discover for himself in what follows – I will try to provide some old and new readings of famous literary masterpieces written in the English language. To speak of English literature here is not entirely accurate, since most of the authors referred to here did not come from England. Some are Irish – the opposite of British, to employ Beckett's famous adage – and one is American. Only a couple of them are actually from Britain. All of them are leading representatives of World Literature, and the works I have chosen to discuss here are among their most famous and well known. As one would expect, critics have historically devoted quite a large number of pages to the analysis of these works, and my humble efforts are not intended to provide a comprehensive account of past readings. However, the fact that these works have been studied in detail in the past should not discourage new readings, and one of the risks here is that I try to offer new clues to their interpretation. To read literature and poetry is something that is rooted in the present of the past. To read literature means to create an inner world of signs anew. All readings are in some way unique, although they have to take account of what has been said and done in the past.

The main focus of this work will be on the ways in which literary language manages to convey messages or, alternatively, get lost on the way. My mode of investigating what language *is* has much to do with what language *does* and how it does it. The aim then is to suggest ways of proposing new analyses based on the idea that approaching the language of literature and poetry tackles the question of how textuality can actually convey messages. My main goal is really to encourage young readers to have their own say in the role of literature and poetry in today's world, starting from the awareness that to interpret a text is to make sense of how language is organized in a particular way for specific reasons. Interpretation is in fact, on the sur-

face, only a secondary step in the reading process; a rather automated response to the very question of why we read at all. To reflect on language in this way is like a conditioned reflex, and what we call “interpretation” is only a further reflection based on the linguistic impression that signs have left on our linguistically organized consciousness.

Before continuing, I should warn the more theoretically inclined readers that this book is intended mainly for college students and common readers to make them aware of how the language of literature can function in different contexts. This is why I refer throughout the book to religious, historical, social and even scientific contexts in which the works in question can be read. I hope, however, that my reflections might also prove interesting to those fond of the mechanisms of poetry and literary textuality in general. Readers will find a number of contextualizations that are not, nor can be, definitive or comprehensive. They are in fact general guidelines that help locate the poems culturally. The literary works under analysis therefore, are only pretexts, so to speak, to reflect on a question that is culturally more interesting: why read literature at all? In fact, the border that separates literature and other kinds of textual expression is constantly changeable and unstable. The very adjectives “literary” and “poetic” are not always used in connection with literature or poetry. Anything can be “poetic”, a smile, a gathering of clouds in the sky, but the question here is, why do we say that something that has been written down on a piece of paper *can* be poetic? As we will see in the forthcoming analyses, the literary and the poetic are both modalities of expression and reception. The midway point between the two is the linguistic “realization” of a message in a defamiliarized context and within an unusual scheme that draws our attention first to why and then to how something was said in one particular way and not another. These two stages, in my view, are the basis of the hermeneutic process and clearly constitute the foundation of any potential interpretation.

CHAPTER ONE

Metaphysical Bodies: John Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed"

"To His Mistress" was most probably written when Donne was still a student at Lincoln's Inn in his early twenties. This deduction is based mainly on the poem's very mundane content, its tones and subject differing substantially from those of his late holy poems. Manuscripts also show that the poem can be dated before 1599. This is not irrelevant in the light of Donne's biographical vicissitudes. In fact, if the once-accepted view of a major transformation from the earthly Jack Donne to the saintly Dr John Donne can be questioned – given the coexistence in his divine poems of the material and the spiritual – one can indeed date the poem to a period when the Catholic-born poet was not yet a supposedly solemn minister of state Anglicanism. This largely explains the free treatment of sexual matters in the elegy, which was actually deemed too indecent to print and led to the poem's omission in the 1633 collection of his poems published by his son.

Elegy 19 is a whirlpool of complex conceits and images chasing each other in a circle. Their mutual movement encompasses the various transfigurations of body and soul within the context of a game that involves religion and myth, as well as the many material implications of sex. The poem is divided into three stanzas of different lengths plus an oddly rhyming couplet. Its plot is seemingly very simple and linear, featuring a speaker who bluntly – though using rich and precious wording – begs a woman to undress for him. The language is highly metaphorical and at times shows a subtext made up of double meanings and subtle sexual allusions. This seems to be the case in the opening lines, "Come, Madame, come, all rest my powers defy, / Until I labour, I in labour lie" (ll. 1-2). The impression that the speaker's intimations work on different levels is confirmed by the argument that follows such an abrupt beginning. The first metaphor of the poem is also, in fact, connected with a peculiar kind

of labour, the labour of war. The lover is compared to the foe who gets tired of waiting before the fight commences (ll. 3-4). So is the lover, who appears to be in real danger of losing the physical ability to meet the woman's desires if she compels him to wait too long before actually giving in to him. This seems to be one of the obscene meanings concealed behind the use of the word "standing" (l. 3), which could easily "stand" here for male erection. All of a sudden, as often happens in Donne's poetry, the vulgar leaves room for the ethereal, the woman's girdle is compared to "heaven's zone glistening" (l. 5), although what it encompasses is "far fairer" than the world of man. Thus, the superhuman is in a way preferable to the human, and those men whose eyes are caught by a "spangled breast-plate" (l. 7) are derogatively described as "busy fools" (l. 8). This seems to suggest that the poem points to explanations beyond the actual sphere of the mortals' world. Despite such a futile impression, all at once the reader is led back to the human, for the "harmonious chime" produced by the coveted unlacing of the woman's breast-plate is said to be a sign that "now 'tis your bed-time" (l. 10). Having dispensed with the breast-plate, the woman is asked to also get rid of her "happy busk," the piece of clothing that the speaker most envies, it being closer to her body than he is allowed to be. After the bodily, the human, the superhuman and the social, the next powerful simile refers to the natural, for the woman's "gowns going off" reveal a beautiful landscape reminding one of "when from flowery meads th' hill's shadow steals" (l. 14). The speaker wishes his friend to remove her "wiry coronet" (l. 15) in order to set free her hair, which is compared to a "diadem" (l. 16). Next, his attention moves from top to bottom, and the woman is begged to take off her shoes "and then safely tread / In this loves hallow'd temple, this soft bed" (ll. 17-8). The human dimension symbolized by the potential approaching sexual intercourse, is again projected onto the mythical, and the angels of Heaven are said to be received by men in similar "white robes" (l. 19). Surprisingly, it is not the Christian Heaven the speaker is referring to, but "Mahomet's Paradise," (l. 21) a place notoriously full of sensual pleasures. A complex and unexpected conceit follows. By a powerful inversion, the heavenly turns into the grossly sexual, those angels, although walking in white, are not evil spirits since evil spirits "set our hairs, but these our flesh upright" (l. 24).

The second stanza opens quite abruptly with the speaker asking for permission to explore the woman's body with his own hands: "Licence my roving hands, and let them go / Behind, before, above,

between, below" (ll.25-6). What his palms long to touch is like a newly discovered land of which he wishes to take full possession: "Oh my America, my new found land" (l. 27). Such land appears to be rich in "precious stones" (l. 29) and prompts the speaker's desire to annex it to make it part of his "emperry" (l. 29). Here, the discourse seems to take on clear political shades. In fact, only distantly does the sexual power of the following metaphor speak of penetrating bodies: "To enter in these bonds is to be free, / Then where my hand is set my seal shall be" (ll. 31-2). The profile of the woman gets blurred, and her status is revealed to be that of a pretext whose purpose is simply to allow one to talk of something else.

With the third stanza, we return to the half-farcical dialogue between body and soul. In praise of "full nakedness" (l. 33), the speaker preaches the need for the soul to emancipate from the body, as parallel to the body's necessity to rid itself of clothing. A complex mythical conceit illuminates the comparison. The gems used by women to adorn themselves are said to be like Atlanta's balls, in that such precious stones eventually attract more attention from men – once more called fools (l. 37) – than the women themselves wearing them. The speaker describes women as "array'd" (l. 40) like "pictures, or like books gay coverings made / For laymen" (39-40). They are not normal books, but rather "mystique books" (l. 41), whose inner meaning is open only to some. The idea is expressed by means of a very subtle satiric reference to the diatribe between Catholics and Protestants revolving around imparted or imputed grace. The last invocation is connected with this. The speaker expresses the wish to see the woman naked in order for him to know, that is, perhaps, to solve the pseudo-theological dispute, for "here is no penance due to innocence" (l. 46).

The final couplet seals the poem by introducing the speaker's first move, presumably given his difficulties in persuading the woman to undress for him: "To teach thee, I am naked first: Why than / What needst thou have more covering than a man" (ll 47-8). His choice to undress first is at the same time an act of surrender and defiance, showing that in love's games there are, for Donne, neither winners nor losers, but mere pretenders and would-be lovers.

Elizabethan poetry deals extensively with love and sexual relations, precisely the primary contextual frame of reference within which

Donne's elegy should be read. However, what the poem lacks is the peculiarly Elizabethan idealization of love that is characteristic of courtly poetry. Neither is Donne interested in an ideal representation of the feelings involved in love affairs, nor in illustrating the hierarchical relations between lovers and the loved. In fact, the poem does not show any such obsession, and does not appear to be too concerned with the very material aspects of sexual intercourse. The subject of the poem actually seems to be the woman's clothing rather than her body, and the only references to the anatomy of the participants in the affair are the half obscene allusions to the great pains of maintaining an erection before the woman might say the fatal "yes". This seems to suggest what I call the "pretextual nature" of the chosen subject. It could be argued that Elegy 19 is as much concerned with sex as it is with investigating the dialogic character of gender relations. The Elegies in general do not seem to provide any particular outlook on Eros, but rather speak of power relations. Thus, their satirical mode is an attempt to cast a cold eye over how the representation of sexual intercourse can actually shape the dynamics of social exchange.

The world Donne depicts is made up of fluid sexual identities, and clear-cut divisions are intentionally avoided. As Treviño Benet argues, once we reject "the notion that Donne's Elegies primarily treat love either in itself or from an autobiographical perspective and read them instead as topical and often satirical social commentary, these poems' oddities –the speakers' lapses of attention to the declared objects of their affection, the negative perspective on some women, and the nastiness about certain men – take on a clear purposiveness" (1994: 33). This might be an oblique version of Donne's old preference for the *discordia concors*, which is ultimately nothing but a conflation of contrasting ideals into a single whole, featuring a final harmonic coexistence of opposites. Such a thesis is proposed by those readings of the poem that emphasise, for example, women's "masculine" clothing, such as the wearing of busks or breast-plates, the purpose of which is really to reduce the apparent differences between males' and females' external appearances. As for the many meanings of the "happy busk" of line 11, Feinstein has an interesting explanation: "On the one hand, and most obviously, it introduces Donne's running pun and theme of "erection," a preoccupation that might be said to culminate in the witty 'flesh upright' of line 24. Busks are straight, erect, and hard, being constructed of wood or whalebone [...] they are phallic" (1994: 68). Such a view leads us to

the question of transvestism, which is not, as Treviño Benet again argues, "an exotic social anomaly but a possibility discussed between two lovers" (1994: 33). In the poem, the inversion of roles does not seem to affect primarily the sphere of sexual identities, nor is it solely involved in the dialectics of gender relations. Rather, it is a metaphor for the possible harmonization of opposite possibilities both in public and private terms.

This tendency to use a subject in order to speak of something else lies at the very core of Donne's poetics and constitutes much of its appeal to modern readers. Donne's elegy points to a realm that cannot but be located outside any possible referential frame, and it would be a mistake to disregard its metaphorical character. Such dynamics are explicitly mentioned in the treatment of Atlanta's balls (ll. 35-8). In the mythical account, Atlanta is ready to marry whoever can outrun her in a race. Hippomenes, who is in love with the girl but knows he's not as fast as her, receives three golden apples from Venus, which he throws in front of Atlanta while she's intent on running as fast as ever. She picks them up and eventually loses the race. They subsequently get married and that she ended up with the wrong man is perhaps demonstrated by the fact that they are both changed into lions. In the Elegy, the metaphor is projected to a further level. Just as the men in the poem are more attracted to the gems the women wear than to the women themselves, the reader can here be misled by the lines and think they refer solely to what they speak of. Real meanings are arguably hidden and can only be grasped if we bypass linear readings to take the road of parallel significations.

Outside the sphere of the individual, sexual relations in the poem also function as metaphors for power relations within a political context. Elegy 19 was written in a climate of change, the final years of the reign of Elizabeth I. The age of Elizabeth had been a period of emerging colonialism and was also a time when the public and the private often blended. Donne's fate in many ways resembles that of one of his contemporaries, a famous explorer whose love poems were very much appreciated in court – Sir Walter Raleigh. It should be noted that Raleigh was one of the favourites of the Virgin Queen, at least as long as he continued to pretend that she was an inspiration to him, without which his poems would have gone unwritten. Later, under James I, Raleigh was to fall into disgrace for reasons that are

much more public and political than private – the disastrous failure of an expedition to Orinoco. However, under Elizabeth, he had already attracted the sovereign’s wrath for having secretly married one of Her Majesty’s Maids of Honour. This might have added some bitterness to her attitude towards him, leading to his imprisonment in the Tower of London for some time. Donne, who joined Raleigh and the Earl of Essex in the expedition to Cadiz in 1596, also had a secret affair which greatly influenced his future life and career. In 1591, his marriage to Anne More, the daughter of Egerton’s brother-in-law, caused first his discharge from service, then his imprisonment and finally his temporary exile from London. Like Raleigh the great explorer, Donne’s life was destined to be greatly confused by the interconnection between the public and the private. This is shown by the hermeneutic importance of the simile concerning the conquest of a woman’s body, described as “my America, my new found land” (l. 27). It is a demonstration of his obsession with the politics of expansionism during Elizabeth’s reign. In the *Elegy*, the simile functions as another pretextual use of a poetic device that enables one to move swiftly from the private to the public sphere. As Parfitt explains, the woman “remains essentially passive, to be discovered and explored – and the more precisely Donne makes language enforce this equation between colonisation and Woman, the more firmly the latter is dehumanised” (1989: 36).

Elegy 19 can indeed be seen as an example of love poetry, although its theme differs substantially from the courtly love described by contemporary poets. However, in the social exchange that constitutes the underlying dialogue between the sexes in the poem, one discovers a focus on the instability of gender identities as a major force working in the shadows. This view is particularly relevant if we look at how the role of women in society was becoming more and more visible. Leaving the monarch to one side, herself a fine example of a manly woman both in her attire and her strength of character, women’s growing independence throughout that period is well documented by many historical sources. A steadily developing market economy accounted for new opportunities for women to get involved in work duties, such as the cloth industry and dairy farming. This relatively new economic freedom was enjoyed by a growing number of women, especially in the cities, and in some way destabi-

JOHN DONNE'S "TO HIS MISTRESS GOING TO BED"

lized the traditional balance of power relations with men. It also gave the impression of approaching social disruption due to uncertainty in the sexual relations between men and women. To read "To His Mistress" against such a social background is to acknowledge the poem's intrinsic satirical character. While on the surface the speaker feels the urge to show off what is left of his own masculinity by demanding that a woman undresses for him, her willingness to consent to his desire is absent, as is any other possibility of her yielding to him with ease. The growing instability of gender relationships in the era is thus mirrored in what looks like an ironical reflection of a peculiar kind of frailty, a frailty whose name is, for once, man.

We are still uncertain as to the exact date in which Donne left Catholicism and embraced Anglicanism. In fact, much of the early Donne criticism was concerned with the question of apostasy, which is at least partly a false question. Although we have little evidence of his early religious life we know that he was born into a Catholic family, and his faith might have been shaken by what had happened to his brother who died in Newgate prison in 1593 after being convicted for sheltering a Catholic priest. However, Donne's choice of Anglicanism was probably dictated more by his aspiration to become an English gentleman than by anything else. We can agree with Parfitt that, by 1596, when he became one of Egerton's secretaries: "it is difficult to believe that Donne was any longer an uncompromised Catholic [...] Egerton was not soft on Catholics [...] Donne must have seemed safe to Egerton, and this means either that Donne was by now a crypto-Catholic for reasons of subversion or ambition. There is, however, no shred of evidence that Donne was, at this time or ever, some type of Catholic subversive" (1989: 11). However, one can acknowledge that in the later years, Donne took his mission as a minister rather seriously, at least if his sermons are any indication. Instead, other religious writings such as some of the *Divine Poems*, show a religious consciousness which is never really at ease with any clear-cut distinction between the spiritual and the material, as the invocation to Christ in the ending of "Holy Sonnet XIV" shows only too well: "Take me to you, imprison me, for I / Except you' enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me" (ll. 12-4). Such a wish to play with religion and to blend its truths and imagery with more mundane and earthly themes, is also clear in "To

His Mistress”, especially in the almost farcical and quite blasphemous use of the debate around whether Christ’s grace is imputed or imparted (see ll. 41-5). According to Carey, the whole debate is “turned into indecent account” (1990: 27). The scholar argues that such “theological niceties, thrust into a bawdy poem, typify that defensive and derisive treatment of religion which [...] Donne’s apostasy prompted” (1990: 92).

If the seventeenth century was to be the new scientific age of Galileo and Newton, one has to be reminded that the traditional Ptolemaic outlook on the universal order had already been questioned by the discoveries of Copernicus, while Kepler’s research was just beginning to circulate during Elizabeth’s later years. England had been visited by Giordano Bruno between 1583 and 1585. Bruno went as far as lecturing at Oxford, although his ideas on the infiniteness of the universe were not very well received by the conservative Oxonian doctors. At least Bruno’s ideas about the infinite worlds were highly influential in certain elite circles, and Sir Walter Raleigh read many of his magical books while imprisoned in the Tower of London. Donne’s attitude towards the discoveries of the new human-centred philosophy was at least partly sceptical. It can be argued that such scepticism was mainly dictated by the fear of a major subversion of the world order known to the society in which he lived. It can also be hypothesised that his conservative outlook in this regard was perhaps a legacy of his institutional role within the Anglican Church. The source of all such speculations is of course Donne’s work. One can refer to his *Anatomy of the World* for a clearer perspective on this: “And new Philosophy calls all in doubt; / The Element of fire is quite put out; / The Sun is lost, and th’ earth, and no mans wit / Can well direct him, where to look for it” (ll. 205-8).

CHAPTER TWO

The "Fantastic" in Poetry: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

The poem's core is the conflict between the human and the natural. Man has a destructive effect on nature, and yet he can expiate his crime by understanding that the world is the repository of God's will, and that all living creatures have to be respected. Such simple morals might seem to imply a sort of pantheistic view of the universe, which possibly also shows the legacy of Coleridge's interest in mystical works by authors like Boehme and Swedenborg who, albeit Christians, believe in the basic hermetic truth that the cosmos is alive and in particular in the material existence of spirits.

The poem is a fable of mystery, demonic guilt and Christian repentance. It is made up of seven parts and alternates stanzas of various lengths with glosses that function as referential frames for the uncanny narrative. The main characters are an ancient mariner and three gallants ready to join a wedding party. The sinister seaman stops one of them and holds him "with his skinny hand" (l. 9). The guest promptly asks him the reason for such behaviour and warns him to release his grip. The rest of the company are said to be "spell-bound by the eye of the old seafaring man, and constrained to hear his fate" (2nd gloss). The mariner sits on a stone and the wedding guest "cannot choose but hear" (l.18). What follows is a fantastic tale about a ship, which sets sail from the harbour heading south under the better auspices of the wind, sun and fair weather. While the mariner tells his tale, the bride "hath paced into the hall" (l. 33), but the guests are still prevented from joining the party by a sort of spell that ties them to the sailor's story.

After leaving the harbour, the ship is driven towards the South Pole by a powerful storm where the weather becomes more sinister and threatening. The crew are plunged into a world of "mist and snow" (l. 51). Suddenly, they see a seabird approaching, an albatross which is compared to a "Christian soul" (l. 65) and the sailors hail "it

in God's name" (l. 66). It eats their food and stays with them. The weather changes and the ship manages to sail northwards again. The bird sits "on mast or shroud" (l. 75) for nine days and is regarded as a good omen until the mariner "inhospitably" (9th gloss) kills it with his crossbow for no apparent reason. He immediately realizes his misdeed.

In the second part, the mariner is blamed by the crew for killing "the bird of good luck" (1st gloss), "the bird / That made the breeze to blow" (ll. 93-4). They are now surrounded by mist. His deed is described as a "hellish thing" (l. 91). All at once, the sun returns and disperses the fog and the sailors change their minds and praise the mariner who "had killed the bird / That brought the fog and mist" (ll. 99-100), which makes them "accomplices in the crime" (2nd gloss). Later on, "down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down" (l. 107) and the ship remains still for endless days. But in the hot sun, they run out of water, and their position in the middle of a watery nowhere makes them ever more aware of their ill conduct. This is said to be the Albatross's revenge: "water, water, everywhere, / And all the boards did shrink; / Water, water, everywhere / Nor any drop to drink" (ll. 119-22). The seamen start to hallucinate about "slimy things" (l. 125) that crawled "with legs / Upon the slimy sea" (ll. 125-6), or "death-fires" (l. 128) dancing at night. The water itself seems to burn "like a witch's oil" (l. 129). Some of the crew believe that those apparitions are spirits come to plague them and decide to further punish the guilty mariner by hanging the dead albatross around his neck.

In the third part, the mariner, who has been forced by the unbearable thirst to bite his arm and suck the blood, spots in the distance something that looks like a ship. Unfortunately, as it comes closer, they all realize there must be something wrong with it, for it still manages to approach them despite the lack of wind or tide. In fact, it looks like "the skeleton of a ship" (4th gloss). The only members of the ghostly crew are two spectrewomen said to be Death and Life-in-Death. During a game of dices, the latter wins the mariner. His companions curse him with their eyes and suddenly drop dead: "the souls did from their bodies fly, / They fled to bliss or woe! / And every soul, it pass'd me by, / Like the whizz of my cross-bow!" (ll. 220-3).

In the fourth part, the wedding guest interrupts the telling of the tale and starts fearing that the mariner is himself a ghost, to which he responds: "fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest! / This body

dropt not down" (ll. 230-1). As the lonely voyage continues, the mariner's fear, desperation and remorse increases until he sees some watersnakes the first living creatures in a long time. They look "blue, glossy green, and velvet black" (l. 279) and are a wonderful sight for him. He unconsciously blesses them and starts to pray, an act he could not accomplish before, and at that moment, the Albatross suddenly falls from around his neck.

In the fifth part, at last, "by grace of the holy Mother, the ancient mariner is refreshed with rain" (1st gloss). The thirst is quenched and soon the winds start rising again. The ship finally moves on, and the corpses on the deck immediately rise up. They groan and stir but keep their eyes closed. The "ghastly crew" (l. 340) starts working together to set sail again. The mariner and a "body" pull a rope, but the two do not exchange words. The fearful wedding-guest interrupts the mariner again, but the ancient seaman calms him down, reassuring him that the ship was rescued "not by the souls of men, nor by the demons of earth or middle air, but by a blessed troop of angelic spirit, sent down by the invocation of the guardian saint" (4th gloss). The ghastly sailors stop working at dawn and cluster "round the mast" (l. 351) as dead as before. Sweet music is heard onboard with the sound of skylarks and little birds. The ship is moving northwards due to a pact between the South Pole spirit and the angelic troop – the spirit "that made the ship to go" (l. 380) until it suddenly makes "a sudden bound" (l. 391) and the mariner falls unconscious. As he sleeps, the polar spirit, helped by his demons, heads southwards again. That was the spirit who "loved the bird that loved the man / who shot him with his bow" (ll. 404-405). He does not want to leave the old seaman unpunished, yet another "softer voice" bids him to leave the seafarer go, for "the man hath penance done, And penance more will do" (ll. 408-9).

In the sixth part, the mariner is still in a state of trance, and the ship goes northwards at a non-human speed. Two voices argue about the reasons why the ship is going so fast. It has to go as fast as it can while the mariner is asleep, "for slow and slow that ship will go / When the Mariner's trance is abated" (ll. 428-9). When he awakes, the ship is sailing in calmer and gentler weather and "the curse is finally expiated" (3rd gloss). In the distance, he sees his native country and heading towards the harbour, he can see all the familiar spots, like the rock and the kirk (the church). The bay is beautiful with reassuring colours. He looks at his dead companions, each one accompanied by a seraphman waving his hands. Then he recognizes the

sound of oars and sees a pilot coming to rescue him. There is also a hermit in his boat who lives in the wood and sings hymns. The mariner feels that “he’ll shrieve my soul, he’ll wash away / The Albatross’s blood” (ll. 512-3).

In the seventh and final part, the boat approaches the ship, and the Hermit wonders who the man is that is standing on the deck. The pilot is sceptical about the ghastly looks of the other vessel and its inhabitants. He invites the hermit to leave him alone but to no avail. At this point, the derelict ship sinks, and the mariner boards the boat, re-entering the realm of reality. The hermit questions him about his experiences, and he suddenly feels a great pain, “a woeful agony, / Which forced me to begin my tale” (ll. 580-1). Since then, the poor mariner is obliged to travel from land to land and whenever the pain reaches him, he has to start telling his tale to a man that he knows “must hear me” (l. 589). The poem ends with an invitation to the wedding-guest to consider the pleasure of going to church as something sweeter than any “marriage-feast” (l. 601). The final stanzas are a farewell from the mariner to his guest and a warning to love “both man and bird and beast” (l. 613). The story of the ancient mariner has apparently some effect on the guest, as in the final stanza a reference is made to his future days. After the mariner has left him, he joins the party “like one that has been stunned, / And is of sense forlorn” (ll. 622-3); and yet “a sadder and a wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn” (ll. 622-5).

The fantastic tale of the ancient mariner can of course be read on several levels, and unsurprisingly, many interpretations of the work have appeared in the last two centuries. Here is how David Perkins poignantly sums up some of them: “depending on the interpreter, it expresses Coleridge’s personal life or psychoanalytic case, his poetic theories, religious beliefs, pantheist metaphysics, biblical hermeneutics, belatedness in literary history [...] The albatross is nature, Coleridge himself, Sarah Coleridge, a human being, Christ, the Divine immanent in nature, or fresh meat as an antiscorbutic. The world of the poem is providential, existential, morally incoherent, or dreamily irrelevant” (1996: 425). It would indeed be better here to speak of the universe of the poem rather than its world, given the infinite range of questions that Coleridge’s verses raise and the possible interpretations they suggest. A classical reading takes account of Coleridge’s

response to religion and metaphysics. Robert Penn Warren, in his famous interpretation of the poem, has it that the mariner's deed re-enacts the fall of man and therefore original sin (1989: 360). This does somehow invert a previously authoritative reading by Lowes in which the mariner, although responsible for his crime, is said to have suffered a little too much for his deed (1964: 275-7).

Questions about how Coleridge's work relates to a romantic sensibility that would have later contributed to the shaping of the Gothic theory of beauty are at the centre of the poem. As regards Coleridge's aesthetics, his idea of beauty refers to a relationship between the parts and the whole. In the *Ancient Mariner*, classical concepts of beauty linked to goodness and perfection, as in the second part, reflect the realm of the horrific, or in more recent terms, the fantastic.

On a purely aesthetic level, an effect of terror is discernible in the ghastly features of the mariner, as well as in the general atmosphere of his never ending story. As Richard Holmes argues, Coleridge fitted the "elements of the plot – the actual shooting of the albatross, the scenes of becalment and drought, the appearance of the spectre ship, the resurrection of the dead crew, the horrific return to harbour – into a beautifully observed and naturalistic world of shifting seascapes and weather, which reflect and intensify the spiritual experiences of the mariner" (1999: 173).

This beauty, in which the terrible and the blessed blend and become as one, reminds one of another poem based on a teleological journey towards bliss and perfection, Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Eric C. Brown sees in Dante's Ulysses – as well as in other figures of "infernal" sailors like Charon – a model for the mariner that Coleridge might have discovered in Boyd's translation of Dante's great work (1998: 649-51). The mariner in fact travels through a sort of half-demonic, half-superstitious hell just to find the way back to the truth of that "good of love" which Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg – whose works Coleridge was very familiar with – regards as one of the main attributes of heaven.

As regards the style of the poem, the ballad form is consistent with Coleridge's and Wordsworth's ideas of the need to fight the traditional principle of decorum or poetic diction that was so dear to eighteenth century poets. This was the theoretical basis of their *Lyrical Ballads* – a collection of poems literally opened by the *Ancient Mariner*. The idea was to work towards the creation of a spontaneous poetic language, a language "really used by man" which would help