



Romanticism on the Net

“The Penance of Life”: The Testimonial Paradigm in Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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Abstract

This article argues that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*’s curious and much commented on theology is best accounted for by examining it in relation to a shift in religious discourses. The poem evidences a disconcerting shift from a Catholic confessional dynamic to one closer akin to an Evangelical paradigm of testimony. As such, the article begins by accounting for the importance of testimony (and its theological logic) in the Evangelical milieu which spread across Britain during Coleridge’s early to middle years. It next examines Coleridge’s developing religious thought in relation to Evangelical concepts, pointing to the significance of what J. Robert Bart termed a “balance” between “man’s work and God’s work in the process of faith; man’s will and God’s will; rational argumentation and divinely granted revelation; objective evidence and subjective religious experience.” Upon situating Coleridge in relation to Evangelical concepts of witnessing, the article more fully examines *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, focusing on the shift in theological logic that changes a kind of Catholic confessional impulse towards an on-going urge to testimony, finally linking the burning feeling that compels the Mariner’s testimony to the Pentecost event as related in the New Testament book of Acts.

Biographical Note

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1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a puzzling text with a puzzling textual history. While Wordsworth remarked on the poem's "strangeness" and suggested that its inclusion as the opener in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* hurt sales, Coleridge's editorial emendations and particularly his gloss served to further complicate these matters. Literary critics too have been puzzled as they attempt to examine the uneasy relations between the poem's supernatural imagery and its moralized conclusion of natural piety. Referring to the poem's complexity and the complicated nature of critical response, Peter Larkin writes

there is no straightforward subversive logic to be extracted from the Rime's perplexities. As untidy extrapolation occurring both within and beyond the poem, the symbolic articulates the shadows of what the poem was trying to become as well as illuminating its blockages. This is also to hint at trajectories by which the poem tries to leave itself behind. (148)

It is clear that, despite the best intentions of critics such as R.P. Warren that the "orthodox Christian response, whereby the tale is one of a halting progress from sin to repentance" is ultimately lacking, for as Larkin notes "only a very limited repentance seems able to penetrate the Gothicizing fabric of the poem" (148).

2. My primary argument is that a great deal of this strangeness derives from the disjunction between the supernatural and quasi-Catholic elements of the poem (elements that are in a sense related to the poem's archaisms and its narrative structure) and an Evangelical or quasi-Evangelical understanding of the dynamic of what D.W. Bebbington refers to as "conversion" and "activism" that comes together in the Evangelical phenomena of testimony and witnessing. In other words, Coleridge's poem uses the concepts and vocabulary of Catholicism (and perhaps High Church Anglicanism) to express concepts that are more rightly at home amongst the followers of John Wesley. In this way, the poem's dynamic of confession and penance is uncomfortably transformed into one of conversion and testimony.¹ This transformation is evident in the Mariner's ultimate expiation, the "penance of life" which melds together the narrative of the Wandering Jew and the story of Pentecost. In order to address these multiple yet connected issues, it will be necessary to first examine testimony as a religious phenomenon and its relationship to the Evangelical milieu of the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. It will then be necessary to clarify the fraught issues surrounding Coleridge's own relationship with the Evangelical revival. I will finally address what these insights into both testimony and Coleridge's relationship to it can tell us about this vexed work of literature.

3. While this article takes into account the poem's textual reshaping, it does not argue that this reshaping affects a dramatic shift in meaning. In this way I seek to separate my position from readings of the poem that view its textual history as representative of serious changes in Coleridge's intent for the poem, such as Graham Pechey's reading which posits that the poem's revisions articulate a shift from the Unitarian position of the young Coleridge to those of his later orthodox Anglicanism, or, Mark L. Barr's recent work that argues that the addition of the gloss is a conservative Coleridge's attempt to limit the subversive politics of the poet's younger self.² I argue that the gloss and revisions generally serve to amplify the poem's insistence on shifting the religious discourse, and in one instance which I will specifically examine, amplify that insistence greatly.³

I. Evangelicalism and Testimony

4. Bebbington, in his influential history of the Evangelical movement in Britain, defines Evangelicalism using the following primary criteria: "*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross" (3). At the conjunction of the first two of these characteristics, conversionism and activism, lies the practice, particularly important amongst Evangelical groups and highly characteristic of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Wesleyans, of testimony.⁴ Testimony in this context refers to the expression of one's experience of faith, often focused around the conversion experience. The centrality of the conversion experience to Evangelical religion is hard to underestimate and it accounts for Bebbington's placement of it as a defining characteristic. The nature of that conversion experience, its emotionality and its position as an orienting point in an individual's life, is also intensely important to any consideration of Evangelical testimony. G.M. Ditchfield sums up both the importance of the experience and its emotional weight in Evangelical tradition thus: "Numerous evangelicals believed that their lives had been transformed by a startling experience or series of experiences which subsequently became the defining moments in their lives . . . for many it was a profoundly emotional experience" (29). Ditchfield further points to the way in which Bebbington's criteria of conversionism is directly related to activism: "the personal experience of the gospel led directly to the obligation to bring its benefit to others" (30).

5. Sociologist Lewis R. Rambo places testimony directly within the context of conversion, both on the level of the prospective convert and the “advocate” who seeks to convert others. Rambo writes “testimony is the narrative witness of a person’s conversion, and it entails two interacting processes: language transformation and biographical reconstruction” (137). Rambo goes on to elaborate the importance of testimony in a conversionist context:

Learning to give one’s testimony of conversion is often an integral part of the conversion process itself. The convert’s testimony serves as an opportunity to demonstrate his or her language transformation and biographical reconstruction. Testimony can also be a potent reminder of the community’s basic values and goals. The community can celebrate the new convert’s experience as well as have a sense that the group’s theology and methods are vindicated by the testimony of a “good” convert. Audience and speaker form a power matrix of support and reinforcement. (137-8)

Rambo is writing generally regarding conversion and testimony and is not historically focused; however, his connection between testimony and conversion clarifies the logic behind testimony and why it forms such an important part of religious movements with an emphasis on conversionism. In this way testimony provides an avenue for a religious group to integrate converts and also provides, from an activist stand-point, an example for the convert to follow.

6. Testimony is thus one of the major manifestations of the conjunction between conversionism and activism, and it emerges with particular importance during the Evangelical Revival. It finds an important place in the emerging Wesleyan movement and continues to hold great spiritual weight for numerous Protestants today. And while the concept of a testimony-centered spirituality has caused some uncomfortable tensions in Protestant sects at various times in history, it has remained an important part of Protestant religious experience.⁵
7. The concept of testimony itself, as practiced during the Evangelical Revival and after, reflects the primary theological differences between most Protestant denominations and Catholicism. The locus of testimony can be found in the importance of the personal faith experience. A major characteristic inherent in Protestantism broadly and Evangelicalism specifically is the importance of faith, with works often subordinated or indeed eschewed all together.⁶ One’s salvation, in this paradigm, primarily depends upon the experience of faith, and thus that experience of faith becomes essential. This can be juxtaposed with the Catholic position that

salvation depends upon works, and ultimately the forgiveness of sins generally within a confessional context. One's rightness with God in the first dynamic rests upon deeply personal experiences while in the second right relationship with God is maintained through ritualized practices of confession and communion.⁷

8. The theological logic of testimony bears some examination here as it will ultimately be relevant for how we treat testimony in relation to Coleridge. The Mariner's re-telling reflects testimonial logic far more than the discourse of confession which it is initially couched in. The Mariner's narrative is characterized by a lack of fixity as to its initial origins, and it contains more than the profane speech it is delivered in can contain. The tormented Mariner's tale certainly does not belong to him but acquires a force outside of him and the profane words he speaks. This mirrors the hermeneutic positions of testimony, as represented by Paul Ricœur. Ricœur has written extensively on the hermeneutics of religious testimony and their relationships to our more profane usages of the term. Ricœur points out that

Testimony is a dual relation: there is one who testifies and the one who hears the testimony. The witness has seen, but the one who receives his testimony has not seen but hears. It is only by hearing the testimony that he can believe or not believe in the reality of the facts that the witness reports. Testimony as story is thus found in an intermediary position between a statement made by a person and a belief assumed by another on the faith of the testimony of the first. (123)

Testimony is in this way a narrative act predicated on the engagement of the testifier and the testified to. It functions at the conjunction between the speaker and listener, hinging upon the listener's own belief in the conviction of the speaker.

9. Ricoeur further examines the logic of our usages of the term testimony and points to the significance it has in regard to conviction and character. False testimony is not testifying to facts one gets wrong, it is intentionally having bad faith. Testimony is thus focused not around the narration of facts but rather the individual faith of the person: "The meaning of testimony seems then inverted; the word no longer designates an action of speech, the oral report of an eyewitness about a fact to which he was witness. Testimony is the action itself as it attests outside of himself, to the interior man, to his conviction, to his faith" (130). In religious terms (drawing from a passage in 2nd Isaiah) "what separates this new meaning of testimony from all its uses in ordinary language is that the testimony does not belong to the witness. It proceeds

from an absolute initiative as to its origin and content . . . But the profane meaning is not abolished. In a certain way it is taken over by the prophetic meaning. This is evident in the aspect of engagement . . . where the prophetic concept and the profane concept are in perfect continuity” (131-2).

10. In Britain testimony begins to play a powerful role during the 17th-century, and expands significantly with the Evangelical Revival of the 18th-century. Testimony ultimately comes to inform and influence a major genre in religious writing, the conversion narrative and spiritual biography. D. Bruce Hindmarsh partially anchors the boom in such writings during the latter half of the 17th-century to the development of religious practice with a strong testimonial component:

Persistent emphasis from pulpit and press on the application of doctrine to experience, on the internal spiritual warfare of the soul, and on the importance of self-examination, all within the context of a well-defined scheme of regeneration, fostered widespread religious concern at a personal level. The typical literary expression of this concern was at first the confessional diary. This passed over into actual autobiography with the rise to prominence of the radical Puritans during the Commonwealth period, when a growing interest in biographies of pious men, an upsurge in religious innovation, and a stress on personal testimony in the reception of new members by the gathered churches all contributed to the emergence of the personal conversion narrative. (42)

This connection between the personal experience and doctrine that ultimately leads to a testimonial religious framework continues to be a prominent part of the religious life during the Evangelical Revival, and as such testimony plays a prominent role.

11. During the Revival testimony proved a double-edged sword. While the intensely emotional expressions of one’s experience of faith and conversion proved an important tool for spreading the Gospel and swelling the ranks of the burgeoning movements, it also laid the movements open to criticism. Ditchfield notes that “there was always the danger that the extravagant displays of public emotion which accompanied many conversions would either ebb away, and leave an impression of a highly temporary phenomenon, or would bring evangelicalism into disrepute by their excesses. The latter frequently happened with early Methodists” (30). The emphasis on both the personal nature of the conversion experience and its often emotional

content lead to accusations of “enthusiasm,” that is (as defined by Dr. Johnson) “a vain belief of private revelation; a warm confidence of divine favour or communication” (Ditchfield 74).⁸

12. These problems regarding testimony and its sometimes overly emotive public performances may have been partially resolved amongst the Wesleyans by the introduction of the “Love Feast,” a practice that Wesley himself borrowed from the Moravians that he met in the United States.⁹ The Love Feast generally consisted of a simple meal, often bread and water or sometimes tea, shared in an atmosphere of praise. It was distinct from communion and was not viewed as a sacrament. It also proved to be both a fertile place for testimony to flourish and an essential tool for continuing the vibrancy of the Methodist movement. As Frank Baker writes:

Scores of references to love-feasts in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century diaries and journals testify to the fact that though the common meal was of real importance as a symbol of Christian family life, and though prayer and signing were inseparable from such occasions, the focal point was testimony, the spiritual ‘sharing’ to which the taking of food and drink together was the symbolic prelude. (25)

As Baker notes, testimony was the central activity within the confines of the Love Feast, and it provided a safe outlet to express one’s experience of faith without risking accusations of “enthusiasm.” It also proved a powerful evangelical tool, as its continuation throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth-century demonstrates. The importance of the Love Feast is hard to overestimate, at least in the latter half of the eighteenth-century when it becomes a prime means of conversion.¹⁰ The significance of the Love Feast for the topic examined here is in its importance as venue for testimony, and once again we see the testimonial nature of Evangelicalism in Britain emerging as a central force.

II. “The zeal of the Methodist”: Coleridge and the Evangelical Milieu

13. While the relationship between the Evangelical Revival and testimony is quite clear, the relationship between Coleridge and this vibrant milieu is more complicated. Part of this problem stems from the fact that while Evangelicalism played such a tremendous role in Coleridge’s culture. Coleridge rarely deals with it directly in his writings. As Luke Savin Herrick Wright notes,

It seems clear that the rise of Evangelical influence and the crystallization of this influence into a movement . . . dominated the religious scene in Coleridge’s early to

middle life, though interestingly the questions of Wesleyan-Methodism and Evangelicalism were never issues Coleridge wrote about. It was other avenues of dissent than post-Wesleyan Methodism, such as Quakerism and Unitarianism, that would captivate Coleridge's eclectic and capricious mind. (41)

Even if these are not issues Coleridge directly addresses often or in-depth, we can still find evidence of their impact in Coleridge's intellectual life. The poet's personal religiosity has been much discussed, as has its relationship to his literary works. Coleridge's writings and lectures from the 1790's when the *Mariner* was first composed reveal a central tension in his religious and philosophical thought between the fiery emotive enthusiasm of the Evangelical and the cool-headed Rational Dissenter embodied in his initial commitment to Unitarianism. J. Robert Barth situates Coleridge in between the advocates of "unbridled reason" (such as Utilitarians, and even Deists) and those primarily reliant on faith such as the Evangelicals and Methodists who "tended to refer their religious belief to a divinely given 'inner light,' over which man had no control." Barth sees Coleridge as finding a space between these positions (though it is a space in tension): "Between these two poles was Coleridge who, who attempted constantly to keep in balance all of the elements of man's religious faith: man's work and God's work in the process of faith; man's will and God's will; rational argumentation and divinely granted revelation; objective evidence and subjective religious experience" (51). This tension is also found in some of his major poems of the period, including the much lauded "Conversation Poems."

14. "The Eolian Harp" the earliest of the Conversation Poems distinctly points to this tension. In it Coleridge contemplates the natural world as a divine revelation bringing to him a personal, experiential knowledge of God's relationship to his creation. Coleridge is a static figure in the poem sitting with his wife Sara beside their cottage while sensations of the world (the poem is incredibly sensual) impinge upon his senses. These impinging sensations, ranging from the scents of the bean field to the sound of the distant sea, and ultimately to the wind-harp, lead Coleridge to an important flight of fancy that has to him in the brief moment, the force of a special revelation:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversly framed,
That tremble into thought as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,

At once the Soul of each, and God of All? (44-8)

This moment of thought is connected to the tension that Barth sees between “rational argumentation and divinely granted revelation; objective evidence and subjective religious experience” and its significance is twofold. First, this moment in the poem is represented as a kind of personal revelation, one which is unfolded by the sensation inherent in the natural world. The second is that this thought then provides a framework for individual experience of revelation, as our minds ultimately function as expression of God’s “intellectual breeze” which imbue us with a soul that is directly connected to the almighty.

15. However, keeping with the tension, the poem does not conclude there, it ends with Sara gently upbraiding the poet for the hubris of this thought as she “biddest me walk humbly with my God, / Meek daughter in the family of Christ” (52-3). Coleridge submits (perhaps half-heartedly) to this critique, resigning himself to be grateful to the God that “gave me to possess / Peace, and this cot, and thee, heart-honour’d Maid!” (63-4).¹¹ We have in this poem a fairly explicit representation of the tension Coleridge continually addresses, and it points to Coleridge’s interest in the value of both sides of the dichotomy. Coleridge demonstrates an affinity for the personal revelation, the kind that was so important to the Evangelical and the down-to-Earth emphasis on reason inherent in the Rational Dissenters.

16. This tension is united, (or perhaps brought in to balance as Barth would say) in Coleridge’s position on social activism as expressed in *Conciones ad Populum*. Coleridge writes “He would appear to me to have adopted the best as well as the most benevolent mode of diffusing Truth, who united the zeal of the Methodist with the views of the Philosopher, should be *personally* among the Poor, and teach them their *Duties* in order that he may render them susceptible to their *Rights*” (43). While Coleridge employs the Methodist as a model for a kind of missionary-style social reform, the religious implications should not be ignored. There is in Coleridge’s unification of the Methodist and the Philosopher an attempt to mitigate a tension inherent in the juxtaposition of those two models. Here Coleridge champions the activism inherent in the Evangelical, an activism derived from the kind of emotional passion that often laid Evangelicals open to charges of enthusiasm. This exists in tension with the coolness of the Philosopher who has come to understand the truth of the Rights of Man. These two opposite forces are united in a kind of witnessing to rationalism, or a testimony of rational truth.¹²

III. The Penance of Life: The Transformation of the Confessional

17. While it would be wrong to suggest that Coleridge is deeply involved in Evangelicalism, it is clear from various sources that he has an interest in some of the major elements that distinguish the Evangelical movement from the orthodox Protestantism of the period. These interests find their way into *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* at all stages of its development and when examined can account for some of the strange and seemingly incoherent elements of the work. *The Rime* as we have it after 1817 is filled with supernatural events, as well as a strangely developed series of Catholic images, and a gloss that seems to amplify many of the tales oddest elements. In order to explain this curious poem, critics have sought to locate the genres of each of the poem's textual elements in order to more adequately place them in relation to one another and Coleridge's own context. The text of the poem itself has long (and correctly) been identified as an imitation of the Old English Ballad form.¹³ This allows us to locate the contents of the poem as part of a simulated medieval context, as much of the poem's archaisms suggest. There are of course, anachronisms that jostle against this mock medievalism (the bassoons of line 33 for instance, an instrument that would not have been found in the middle ages) but it does some of the work of helping us to make sense of the strange poem.

18. The gloss then, is often read as later (perhaps seventeenth-century) editorial on-top of an older manuscript. Huntington Brown characterizes it thus:

the minstrel is not meant to be the author of the gloss. The gloss can only be the work of an imaginary editor. Its style (notice the common Cavalier term used to refer to the wedding guests, "gallants"), the fact that its writer is learned (his vocabulary includes words like *element*, *invocation*, *invisible*, *inhabitant*, *accomplice*, *accorded*, *supernatural*, *retarded*, *expiated*, *constraineth*), and his particular kind of learning (the authorities he cites are those of seventeenth-century theology and neo-Platonism, and he names the Pacific Ocean), characterize him as a scholar, modern rather than medieval, but distinctly old-fashioned, therefore an early and bookish antiquarian, a figure hardly less quaint in his own way than the minstrel -indeed rather more so-but one who occupies a very different social position and belongs to a much later period of literary history. (320)

While this formulation explains the archaisms, and the Catholic invocations of saints, angelic hierarchies, and the blessed virgin, it highlights a larger disjunction, one which renders much of

the poem's archaically oriented theology incoherent, unless we re-envision that theology transforming through a Protestant (and indeed Evangelical lens). The confessional dynamic at the heart of the Catholic vision of religiosity is transformed into a testimonial dynamic, anchored together by the concept of the "Penance of Life" that is the Mariner's ultimate lot. This "Penance of Life" further merges together the tradition of the Wandering Jew with the ascendant Evangelical story of Pentecost, a story which very clearly merges the two Evangelical characteristics of conversionism and activism, which provide the foundations for testimony.

19. It seems redundant and unnecessary to trace the various Catholic elements of the Mariner's journey; therefore, I will focus primarily on the moments where we can trace the shift in discourses.¹⁴ This primarily begins with the important turning point where the Mariner blesses the writhing water-snakes. While this moment is often viewed as one of the many curious theological elements in the poem, it bears examination and incorporation into the greater discussion.
20. Midway through the Mariner's journey, as the series of catastrophic events begins to finally dissipate, the ship becomes tranquil and, as the gloss tells us, "By the light of the Moon he beholdeth God's creatures of the great calm." These creatures, glowing water-snakes of various color, strike the Mariner as beautiful, and he spontaneously blesses them:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gush'd from my heart,
And I bless'd them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I bless'd them unaware. (283-88)

This passage is often viewed as one of the strangest in the work, for a number of reasons. Some critics have pointed to it as an isolated event that does not figure with the trajectory of the poem, which has much more misery in store for the Mariner. Others see the strange act of the Mariner, a figure in the midst of his own ethical crises, as curious. Why does the Mariner have power to bless? Why is his blessing significant?

21. The strangeness in this passage comes from the melding of the two discourses I had previously mentioned, one which occurs partially here, but will ultimately find its full expression later, as the Catholic confessional discourse is replaced by the testimonial discourse. The blessing finds its origin outside of the Mariner himself, and seemingly, outside of the context directly surrounding him. He places the responsibility for this shift on his “kind saint” and this is significant. As Harry White notes “While we may or may not accept the mariner's interpretation, we must not overlook the most significant fact that his positive state of mind came about without any actual change in his circumstances or the natural environment” (816). What is important about this passage is as R.L. Brett noted half-a-century ago “this act of blessing does not *win* God's grace; it *is* God's grace” (101).¹⁵ This section merges a Catholic discourse, (note the intercession of the Mariner's “kind saint,”) and a more grace driven Protestant theology.
22. If these two discourses find initial expression here, their tension and the ultimate ascendance of the testimonial over the confessional is most distinctly presented in the segment of the poem where the Mariner confesses to the Hermit. It is at this point that the poem reshapes the confessional paradigm into a testimonial one through the medium of the Mariner's “Penance of Life.”
23. The Mariner's encounter with the Hermit is, to my mind, one of the strangest moments in the poem. It occurs in the seventh part of the poem, after the Mariner has undergone the bulk of his perilous journey. Indeed, part of what is curious about the scene is the way in which its suggested forgiveness and penance works, as it comes after, as the gloss tells us at 446 “the curse is finally expiated.” Any theological reading of the text has to grapple with the fact that the Mariner asks for absolution *after* we are told that his sin has been forgiven. This is a moment when Coleridge's gloss significantly amplifies the change in religious dynamics. The Mariner's crimes have been expiated, *without* confession. Rather we can argue that what redeems the poem's protagonist in the acceptance of grace that allows him to bless the water-snakes. This shifts the centrality of the confession and its purpose, a purpose that is reworked to support a different religious dynamic.
24. As the Mariner's ship approaches the shore of his homeland, he comes upon a boat containing three men, including the Hermit:

I saw a third—I heard his voice:
It is the Hermit good!
He singeth loud his goldy hymns
The he makes in the wood.
He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away
The Albatross's blood. (512-17)

The Mariner desires to be cleansed of the blood of his crime, to confess and to receive absolution. The use of the term shrieve here is one of Coleridge's archaisms, and it is doubly archaic at this moment in the sense that the poem's avowed spiritual position has moved beyond the confession of sins from a theological standpoint. The gloss assures us that the Mariner's crimes have been expiated, a term denoting that the Mariner has earned forgiveness. This expiation required the Mariner's terrible journey, but it did not require his confession.

25. We may see echoes of the Book of Common Prayer's position in the Mariner's confession, wherein confession and absolution are represented as more therapeutic than theologically necessary. The 1662 English Prayer Book states:

And because it is requisite, that no man should come to the holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore, if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel; let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness. (The Communion)¹⁶

If the paradoxical nature of the Mariner's expiation followed by the confession seems counterintuitive from a Catholic point of view, it makes a certain amount of sense within this Anglican viewpoint. And yet, that Orthodox Anglican viewpoint does not account for the next step in the poem's strange penitential trajectory. The confession serves a purpose beyond the Catholic dynamic of absolution and the Anglican purpose of "quieting of conscience," and it is with this confession that the theological perspective shifts most explicitly and importantly.

26. Upon reaching the boat wherein the Hermit sits, the Mariner exclaims "O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man!" (578) and then

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrench'd
With a woeful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale,
And then it left me free. (582-585)

Coleridge's gloss invokes the important concept that brings all of this together, the "penance of life." The gloss reads "The ancient Mariner earnestly entreateth the Hermit to shrive him, and the penance of life falls on him." We should note that this penance of life begins with this first telling of the tale, and it is important to point out that the Mariner does not in fact appear to be confessing sins, so much as testifying to his experience. He is compelled (in a way perhaps similar to those who are engaged in witnessing might recount) not to confess the killing of albatross, but rather to tell his tale, in a manner we assume similar to how he is telling it to the Wedding Guest.¹⁷

27. The penance of life that falls upon the Mariner seeks to reinterpret the function and responsibility of penance from a Catholic context wherein a priest (represented here by the Hermit) gives absolution and assigns penance in order to restore right relationship with God. The Mariner's wrenching pains, the burning he feels in his heart until his tale is told, has no intermediary; it is represented as coming directly from the divine and compelling him to speak. It is not enough for the Mariner to confess and sincerely repent of his sins, he must actively testify to his experience, he must become a witness to the redemptive power of God, anything less fails to be penance, anything less fails to restore or maintain right relationship with the Almighty.
28. This kind of continuing penance that takes the form of witnessing finds a textual foothold at the end of Part V where the Mariner hears two voices speaking to one another in the air. The second of the two voices concludes the section stating "The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do" (409). The gloss here states "The Polar Spirit's fellow daemons, the invisible inhabitants of the elements, take part in his wrong; and two of them relate, one to the other, that penance long and heavy for the ancient Mariner hath been accorded to the Polar Spirit, who returneth southward." The narrative then continues on quickly as the Mariner falls into a trance as the ship heads towards his home. Twenty-lines after the trance begins the mariner awakes, the ship becalmed briefly and we learn from the gloss "his penance begins anew." This statement begs the question as to the nature of this penance, for in another ten lines

at 443, we learn that the curse is finally expiated. This penance done and yet again points to this continual penance, which does not end even when sins are forgiven but rather is born forward by the Mariner in the form of testimony.

29. The character and quality of the Mariner's speech should also make us think about his story through the paradigm of religious testimony. To return to Paul Ricœur's work on the hermeneutics of testimony "Testimony as story is thus found in an intermediary position between a statement made by a person and a belief assumed by another on the faith of the testimony of the first" (123). Testimony as a narrative act is intended to engage the listener's faith in the one who testifies. It is ultimately about the faith-experience of the person involved and asks the listeners themselves to engage with that faith as a presumption that this faith is genuine. And yet, there is something important beyond this engagement with the faith of another, as Ricœur also notes: "what separates this new meaning of testimony from all its uses in ordinary language is that the testimony does not belong to the witness. It proceeds from an absolute initiative as to its origin and content . . . But the profane meaning is not abolished. In a certain way it is taken over by the prophetic meaning. This is evident in the aspect of engagement . . . where the prophetic concept and the profane concept are in perfect continuity" (131-2).

30. We have ample evidence throughout the Mariner's act of narration that there is something beyond the profane meaning of the words he states. This is evident in the fact that his body is literally taken over with the burning desire to tell the tale and an otherworldly knowledge directs him to the person he must reach:

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

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange powers of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the many that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach. (586-94)

The Mariner sees a face and knows who he is directed to. This otherworldliness is evident also in the “strange powers of speech,” the Mariner mentions. The usage of the word strange here seems to signify foreignness not just from the perspective of the Wedding Guest who has sat transfixed by the famous “glittering eye” but also to the Mariner himself. This strange power of speech, again signifies that there is something beyond the profane language the Mariner uses to describe his journey, for it causes the Wedding Guest who “can not chuse but hear” (19) to listen “like a three years child” (15).

31. The Mariner’s perpetual wandering recalls two other reference points that have bearing upon this discussion. It invokes the legend of the Wandering Jew and the feast of Pentecost. The figure of the Wandering Jew is well represented in European literature and carries with it the kind of Gothic significance employed by Charles Maturin in his anti-Catholic *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Coleridge’s use of the figure has long been noted, initially by John Livingston Lowes, and then more expansively by O. Bryan Fulmer. Fulmer in particular points to the legend of the Wandering Jew as the primary model for the Mariner, and according to him any reading of the poem must take into account its significance. Taking the legend into account helps to explain what many see as the poem’s problematic moral justice, the Mariner’s punishment and penance are often viewed as of a much greater magnitude than the crime. Fulmer notes that this is related to Coleridge’s adaptation of his source material, “Now the severity of the Mariner’s accursed life is that, though he ardently desires redemption and is assiduously penitent to win it, he never attains the joys of Oneness because his sin against the spirit of life is, according to the terms of the legend guiding the poem, unredeemable for it is equivalent to the unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost” (806). I believe that Fulmer is correct to anchor the poem’s problematic question of moral justice in its source material. However, I also think the Mariner’s continued penance, his continual repeated and renewed path towards redemption functions as a critique of the confessional model. While the “curse” has been “expiated” more than a hundred lines before the Mariner encounters the Hermit, (thus negating the Mariner’s need for an absolution granted by the Hermit) the Hermit is unable to aid the Mariner in establishing a permanent right-relationship with God. Rather it is the Mariner’s continual roaming and witnessing that allows him to engage in a continued restoration of the relationship. Coleridge adapts the legend of the Wandering Jew, but uses it to point to the inadequacy of confessional religion and promote a theological position that sees the relationship

with God as continually renewing and renewable. Coleridge does this by merging the Wandering Jew figure with the story of the Pentecost as related in the Acts of the Apostles.

32. For Wesley, along with numerous other members of the Evangelical revival, the call to religious action was found in the Pentecost event, wherein according to Acts, the holy spirit came down among the apostles and caused them to speak in diverse tongues and filled them evangelical fire.¹⁸ Wesley's explanatory notes for the New Testament further characterize the event, his exegesis emphasizing the power of speech given to the Apostles, while also paying particular attention to the flames: "And there appeared distinct tongues, as of fire - That is, small flames of fire. This is all which the phrase, tongues of fire, means in the language of the seventy. Yet it might intimate God's touching their tongues as it were (together with their hearts) with Divine fire: his giving them such words as were active and penetrating, even as flaming fire." (291 v.3). The usage of fire (originating in the passage from Acts) is worth mentioning, as the Mariner's agony is described as relating to a burning sensation. And the tongues of fire which descend upon the Apostles bring with it what Coleridge might describe as "strange powers of speech" particularly as Wesley describes it in his gloss:

And they began to speak with other tongues - The miracle was not in the ears of the hearers, (as some have unaccountably supposed,) but in the mouth of the speakers. And this family praising God together, with the tongues of all the world, was an earnest that the whole world should in due time praise God in their various tongues. As the Spirit gave them utterance - Moses, the type of the law, was of a slow tongue; but the Gospel speaks with a fiery and flaming one. (291 v. 4)

We can certainly see, in the Mariner's recounting of his tale, a kind of power of speech anchored in the Pentecost. Wesley's account, which aligns quite well with Ricœur's insights regarding testimony's origin in an "absolute initiative." This too is borne out by the Mariner's supernatural powers which have an origin, like the painful drive he feels to spread his story, outside of him in the absolute that allowed for his punishment and redemption.

33. Coleridge's revisions here reveal striking connections between the Mariner's burning, his compulsion to tell his story, and the Divine will that directs it. The original 1798 text as published in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* renders the passage treated above as

Since then at an uncertain hour,
Now oftimes and now fewer,

That anguish comes and makes me tell

My ghastly aventure. (629-32)

Here we have the anguish coming and forcing (again indicating something external) the Mariner to tell his tale. The 1800 version, published in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, is closer to the later revisions:

Since then at an uncertain hour,

That agency returns;

And till my ghastly tale is told

This heart within me burns. (pg 196)

The use of the “agency” in place of what will ultimately become “agony” in 1802 and after is important. It seems to demonstrate that what Coleridge has in mind (at least in his 1800 revisions) is a capacity for action, granted by the divine. In this passage the power of the Mariner’s testimony, his strange powers of speech and the glittering eye, seem to products of the divine will that is now characterized as a fiery sensation in his heart.

34. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* illustrates a shift in theological thought that helps explain some of its strangeness. The poem’s quasi-medieval context suggests that it should be read through the Catholic paradigm supported by its continual invocation of saint’s and the Blessed Virgin. And yet the theology here shifts, invoking a confessional model of forgiveness and redemption only to replace it with a testimonial dynamic. At the end of the poem the Mariner is not redeemed by confession and absolution. He is not shriven, as much as the Hermit might try to shrive him. He is given “the penance of life” and within that phrase is the most important theological message of the poem. The Mariner’s life should always be about maintaining a right relationship with God. That relationship is maintained, according to the poem, through a continued testimony to his conversion experience on the waves. In this way the confession of sins is transformed into a witnessing that hinges upon a continued revival of the moment of Pentecost.

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¹ This transformation of the confessional mode may also be aligned with the dynamic that Mark Canuel identifies in *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing 1790-1830*, which reads numerous Romantic era works as written in opposition to what their authors see as an oppressive religious and political system based on the tyranny of the confessional.

² See Pechey “Crossed Lines: The Vernacular Metaphysics of the *Ancient Mariner*.” Also see Thomas Dilworth’s “Symbolic Spatial Form in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the Problem of God,” Russell M. Hillier “Coleridge’s Dilemma and the Method of ‘Sacred Sympathy’: Atonement as Problem and Solution in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,” and Barr “The Forms of Justice: Precedent and Gloss in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*” for these perspectives.

³ As noted, I do not intend to dwell substantially on Coleridge’s revisions. As J.C.C. Mays notes in the *Collected Works*, Coleridge continued to refine his poem throughout his lifetime. Each subsequent publication over the course of three decades contained some revisions. The most significant appear in the 1817 publication of *Sibylline Leaves*, which, amongst other emendations, adds the well-known marginal gloss. Unless otherwise noted all quotations from the poem are of 1834 edition as found in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*.

⁴ This article intends to treat Wesleyanism alongside a number of other movements that were part of the Evangelical milieu. While there were very serious differences within the theology of these movements, they are handily united by Bebbington’s criteria, and all share an emphasis on what is important for this particular investigation: the role of testimony.

⁵ For a broad overview of these tensions in Protestantism see the section on “Personal Experience and Authority” in Martin E. Marty’s article “Protestantism” for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.

⁶ That is not to say that good works are not part of the Protestant religious experience. Bebbington sums up Wesley’s position as follows: “Faith is the only means by which we are made right with God; but faith, as soon as it exists, creates an impulse towards living a better life” (22). Wesley’s position seems generally representative of the broader Evangelical movement.

⁷ Confession for the Evangelical was primarily done in groups as a way of being personally honest about one’s actions. Methodists found the Love Feast (treated below) a prime place for these kinds of confessions and in this way confession becomes intertwined with testimony. For simplicity when I write about a confessional paradigm I am speaking of the ritualized Catholic practice.

⁸ For a detailed examination of Wesley’s responses to charges of enthusiasm and their relationship to claims of divine inspiration see chapter two of Hempton’s *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*.

⁹ The love feast of Wesley and the Moravians (despite the eventual differences Wesley instituted) are attempts to revive the early Christian tradition of the *Agape* meal, which had become all but extinct in contemporary Christianity. Baker concisely recounts Wesley’s adoption of the practice from the Moravians and the ultimate shifts in chapter one of *Methodism and the Love-Feast*.

¹⁰ Baker cites numerous examples of ministers, particularly after Wesley’s death, utilizing the Love-Feast as a means for conversion. See specifically chapter three in *Methodism and the Love-Feast*.

¹¹ One thing that is highly interesting about the tension between revelation and reason in this poem, is that it reverses the sometimes contentious relationship between faith and intellect. It is Coleridge's intellectual speculations that are treated as part of a suspect divine revelation, while Sara's humble piety is in a sense akin to a rationalist approach which advocates not idly speculating about that which is beyond our grasp.

¹² I resist referring to this as secular witnessing, as Coleridge's inclinations towards Rational Dissent during this period points to the integration of this kind of discourse into a larger theological system.

¹³ Huntington Brown noted this in his 1945 article, and I believe that Tristram P. Coffin was the first critic to fully note the use of the "ballad stanza" in 1951. See his "Coleridge's Use of the Ballad Stanza in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.'" "

¹⁴ The 1817 revisions amplify the initial Catholic representation, explicitly telling the reader, for instance, that the revived corpses of the Mariner's crew are not the crew revived but rather "a troop of spirits blest" (55). The gloss at this point interprets this line stating, "But not by the souls of the men, nor by daemons of earth or middle air, but by a blessed troop of angelic spirits, sent down by the invocation of the guardian saint."

¹⁵ Brett also nicely points out that "the calm is replaced with a roaring wind that brings to mind echoes of Pentecost." This prefigures my own contention that the Pentecost story plays an important role in this work.

¹⁶ It should be noted, that while the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine articles acknowledge confession, it was not an official rite of the Anglican Church until the twentieth-century, and its existence even in a semi-official or unofficial capacity was controversial throughout British history.

¹⁷ We are urged to see the Mariner's tale to the Wedding Guest as one numerous continual repetitions of the story, repetitions that have their first telling in the confession/testimony given to the Hermit.

¹⁸ Wesley's anchoring of this event as the crux of the Evangelical call to action can be seen in numerous sermons, for example his sermon on "Christian Perfection." Also see J. Steven O'Malley's "Exploring the Background for the Pentecost Connection in Early Methodism."