

The structure of S.T. Coleridge's poem "The rime of the ancient mariner"

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Abstract. The essay treats S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as one of the works, which traced possible ways of transition from classical structure of the epic and ballad to a romantic lyric-epic poem. The adventurous plot of the poem is traditionally organised by the figure of the protagonist, however, in the focus of depiction there is not a travel, but the spiritual experience, which ensures the integrity of the world. The harmony is recovered by dialectical removal of symbolical oppositions. The subjects of research are the dualism of the plot and its symbolic interpretation that form the new genre modification of the romantic lyric-epic poem.

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Introduction

The difficulty of a long poem genre definition, like any genre in its endless evolution, may be explained only by the mobility of genre canon. At the turning points of history new types of well settled genres tend to appear. The genre content, being formed during its evolution, steps into a dialog with content of history. That is why genre ensures the unity and continuity of literature development [1].

Long poem is originally an epic. Romanticism cardinally changed the sense of relations between the man and the world. The man stops being an object of various impacts, – fate, luck, incident – but means to be a reformer and a creator of the world. N. Frye noted that if before the romantic era everything that existed was considered to be made by God, then after it all came to be the work of man. Instead of representation of the world as something made, comes in the comprehension of its organic wholeness [2]. A romantic poet is meant to be an embodiment of creative activity. Impartial and hidden behind self developing narration in an ancient epic, in a romantic poem he aspires to self-realization, identifying himself as the hero who comes forward to narrate. The poem attributes to lyric and as far as attention is concentrated on spiritual experience, the function of its plot (as the sequence of events without motivation) weakens. The plot in a romantic poem may be dashed, detailed or complete of the vagaries; in any case, it is of secondary interest. External events are in the background for the manifestation of a romantic hero, like signs of his spiritual activities. S.T. Coleridge, not only the poet but theorist of romanticism, once noticed about Shakespeare's plays "that interest in the plot is always in fact on account of the characters... the plot is a mere canvass and no more" [3]. Thus the conflict is transferred into the consciousness of the hero.

Genre of Coleridge's poem

S.T. Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is an allegoric composition combining events, symbols and moral codes. It imitates a middle century ballad and has been included in "Lyrical Ballads" [4]. Some scholars consider it to be an epic poem because infatuation for with an epos has been very strong and each poet strived to write something universal [5]. Coleridge's poem as a genre form is neither a ballad, (the ballad might be called the story told by Mariner), and not a poem yet. From the ballad it inherits metrical pattern (not always observed); "terrible" character, flow of events, their "jumping"; absence of distance between the story and its teller; interception of dialogs and questions that lead the action; dramatic presentation of emotions. Constantly rewriting "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (by adding an epigraph, glosses and taking off some citations) Coleridge gradually molded it as the romantic poem. The travel motive identifies the epic trends; the type of a hero is a lyric one. This doubled dualism of genre intentions may be watched in the structure of his creation.

The plot sets up on a travel of Mariner to the South Pole and his return to the native place. This plot may be interpreted as "the journey of the soul" similar to Dante's "The Divine Comedy". The plot is introduced in the "Argument". The epigraph from T. Burnet tells about strange things necessary to demonstrate the large and the best world, and do not allow people to submerge in shallow ideas [6]. The epigraph commutes events in an allegorical plan. Hence the plot, that might be interesting by itself, turns into an illustration of the author's idea and ethical postulate. The true meaning of the poem is hidden behind the adventures.

The history of crime – punishment – expiation that organizes the "The Rime", coincides with epic

triadic scheme (loss – search – finding), identified by G.W. Hegel [7]. The murder of Albatross violates the world harmony; the experience of ordeals contributes to spiritual rehabilitation but on a different basis. The Mariner, who leaves his country, returns to the same place. All the events happen in the sea. The sea resists “home” as a place of strange incidents that extract a man from the real world, space and time. Exact reference-points: the sun’s moving, the quantity of elapsing days; detailed description of hero’s sufferings; gale, calm, all these add trustworthiness to mystical world. However, all the concreteness is illusive and time is conditional. Epic’s indistinguishable time is achieved by transferring the events into transcendental plane.

Colridge’s symbolism

In the recent decades the interest in Coleridge’s creativity focused on his ethical concepts [8, 9, 10] and archetypal symbols [11]. This is natural, because the new genre modification is based on dualism of plot and its symbolic interpretation. The development of the main theme in “The Rime” takes place on symbolical level. The sense of misconduct and retribution clears up during the transition process. The harmony is being restored through dialectic confluence of opposition of rest and motion. The rest seems to associate with the death: the murder of the Albatross draws calm; “the silence of the sea” means death of sailors, almost death of the Mariner. The South Pole looks like hardening chaos. Motion is connected with life (“The upper air burst into life”), and it returns the possibility of revival to the Mariner and the ship. But this correlation is not absolute. Storm is an incarnated motion, which brings death also: furious aspiration of the ship drawn by good Spirit a man cannot endure (the Mariner loses consciousnesses). Marine creatures, offsprings of calmness, provoke the Mariner’s contempt that sufferings are after all generated by God; creatures of the “great calmness” induce his rescue. Semantic meaningfulness of symbols is ambivalent, but their opposition is constant. The harmony achieved unites all contradictions, keeping dialectic compatibility as a mortgage for further evolution. The Moon and the stars, being at rest, but always in motion, become the symbols of harmony. This illogical implementation is designated as moving rest as well as self equated state.

The Albatross and the Spirit of the South Pole show the same interconvertibility of ethical opposition. The mystery of Albatross’s appearance is not evident to the sailors; and depending on the circumstances they assume him to be either good or evil. The Spirit of the South Pole sends down the storm that threatens by the death but then takes his revenge for the death of his antagonist, the Albatross:

The Spirit who bidenth by himself

In the land of midst and snow.
He loved the bird that loved the
Who shot him with his bow [12].

The opposite pairs are swiped by mutual gravitation, by love, supporting harmonic equilibrium of the world. The murder of the Albatross violates the balance of contradictions. The Mariner, by going through sufferings, is enveloped by love to each world creation and perceives his belonging to it. The harmony is being restored on a new level, the association of subject and object.

The sea with its changing of gales and smoothness stands against to stability of “home” as a place of endless rebirths of harmony out of chaos. Setting up and taking off the oppositions follow a circular trip (the path from home to home is a sort of the boundary between man and nature) [13]. The loss of harmony is accompanied by disappearance of elements and new possibilities; it’s restoring by their emergence. First, the wind subsides; dead sailors fall down; the Mariner suffers from thirst and loses his ability to pray. Then everything comes to life, the Spirit lodges the dead bodies, the sky accepts the Mariner’s pray. The equator marks the equilibrium of space.

The hero and narrator

The Mariner is an ordinary man, taken out of his everyday routine. By killing the Albatross of his own will, he makes an act that turns him into a hero. He is not subjected to time now. Since the beginning of the poem the Mariner is named «ancient»; the time of his wanderings is endless. In folks beliefs a bird is an embodiment of soul (“Christian Soul”) [14]. Therefore, crime against world harmony is accompanied by loss of the soul. Thus the one, who kills the Albatross, must be rejected by the world of the living.

In the Mariner’s story an allusion to three Dante’s circles, through which each man’s soul must pass, and that each man carries inside himself, may be trace: “haze of pole”, “hot and copper sky”; “bright Sun”; seven days as seven death sins, dead sailors; pray and benediction of all the living. Here the theme of spiritual rebirth is supported by changing of the seasons. Using G.W. Hegel’s words about Dante, this poem integrates the eternal states of hell, purgatory and paradise [15].

Epic construction includes epic plot and lyric subplot; both of them posses different but not simultaneous completions. The Ancient Mariner, adjoined to supernatural and survived, remains a carrier of transcendental into reality. The two worlds coexist only in his consciousness. He tries to ease his soul by telling his story and concludes it by preaching love and prayers. Likely retribution during the ship’s

drifting recurred repeatedly, so repeatedly the ancient Mariner is doomed to tell his story time after time. Of the three men, whom he meets on his return, he chooses “the Hermit” and out of three youths he picks the Wedding-Guest. The Mariner is the only one among two hundred sailors, who committed the crime of own accord (all other are punished because they did not try to stop him and praised him). He is also the only one, who is chosen by Life-in-Death as a keeper of knowledge of the eternal harmony (life) while existing in stability of the ordinary (death). He can be himself on condition of telling his story (N. Frye remarks that in terms of romantic esthetic the images of the church and fiancée are the signs of identity) [16].

The Mariner, connecting the two worlds in his soul, partly adopts the author’s functions and his way solving the conflict by “the word” (R.P. Warren sees in the image of Albatross, the symbol of poetical energy, ruined by the poet – The Mariner) [17]. Being an ordinary person the Mariner loses his prophetic force after telling his story. The narration is conducted in the first person, but the Mariner is an odd observer and relates those events, which he could not have seen other than asleep or unconscious. At the same time he is not distanced from the events told. He experiences them again and again, and as a chronicler he imprints the facts and the emotional reactions.

Inference

N.J. Berkovsky considered the plot in Coleridge’s poem to be transferred in glosses, leaving “lyrically intelligent” for the main text [18]. In fact it seem that comments on the fields do not clarify the eventful sequence, but give moral estimation to everything what is going on. While the main text reports about the sailors who begin to praise the Mariner, glosses explain the reader that from this very moment they are linked to his crime. While the Mariner rejoices seeing a ship, comments on the fields warn the reader about new dreads. The notes on the margins explain the semantics of the Moon, the Sun and confirm the spirit’s existence by referring to M. Psellus. The comments are alienated from the events that happened, and take an evaluating stance. The story told by the Mariner is included in the author’s context of comments, as well as epigraph and “Argument”.

The narrator and the commentator are split into two correlated texts. When the spirits explain to the Mariner the meaning of punishment and his soul bends to good; their positions brings them together. The final moral conclusion completes the Mariner’s story. Included in the context of the poem his story in a certain sense seems to be a playing off good and evil opposition, sort of illustration of this maxim. The

appeal of the Mariner influences the Wedding-Guest (“A sadder and a wiser man”); transition from night to morning symbolizes his belonging to knowledge.

The Mariner can appeal to other characters (“Be calm, thou Wedding-Guest!”). The commentator appeals straight to the reader. The mystic ballad, submerged in the author’s range, becomes the romantic poem, epic by its travelling reason and triadic structure, and lyric by the hero. Thirty years later Coleridge admitted that the main and only defect of his poem is its obtrusive moral based on imagination, incompatible with the world of imagination [19].

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