

A SICKNESS OF THE SOUL:  
THE COLERIDGEAN SPECTRALITY OF  
ANTHONY CATANIA'S GALLEON-GHOST

‘Doubtlesse this could not be, but that she turnes  
Bodies to spirit by *sublimation* strange’  
—Sir John Davies, ‘Of the Soule of Man’<sup>1</sup>

If there is anything in Anthony Catania’s *Spectre-Bark* exhibition that instantly evinces his unnerving revision of Coleridge’s *Rime*, it is arguably ‘Fatal Flight’ – for what this black pastel drawing seizes as the avenging aftermath of the Mariner’s sacramental crime is his implied spectralisation into a Coleridgean death-craft. Significantly, what soars into the albatross’ vanishing vision, while it plunges like an Icarian phoenix in reeling resurrection, is Cruickshank’s ‘skeleton ship’<sup>2</sup> distilled to clawing Coleridgean ‘ribs’ (l.185).<sup>3</sup> Strangely, however, no crossbow-wielding Mariner looms anywhere. It is as if the albatross’ screech unleashes a sea-change into something sable and sinister: a Mariner transfigured, like Stoker’s Dracula on the *Demeter*, into a phantom rigger. But equally pivotal to ‘Fatal Flight’ is the albatross’ parallel spectrality, initiated by propelling the bird’s descent to the title drawing’s darker fate – a Catania catalyst more weirdly subversive than that of other *Rime* artists. That no Coleridgean neck-hanging albatross haunts ‘Spectre-Bark’ or any of Catania’s drawings and paintings like it does Peake’s Doré-inspired illustration is in fact only half the point. Equally crucial is that Catania transcends Peake’s touching notion of making, to quote Gavin O’Keefe, ‘the lower section of the Albatross almost merg[e] with the stomach of the Mariner’, by blending man and bird far beyond ‘their nether-ends’ (p.9). For Catania, by sharing none of Palmer’s predilection for what Stephen Hebron calls ‘a solidity [that] softens the nightmare aspect’ of his *Rime* engravings (p. 111), mutates the Mariner into a bizarre concoction of Coleridge’s assassinated albatross and his ‘Nightmare Life-in-Death’ galleon (l. 193) – a ‘spectre-bark’ (l. 203) whose emaciated masts take flight like an avian presence crucified. ‘Spectre-Bark’ is nothing but a sickness of the soul transmogrified. For by transmuting the Mariner into an undead ordeal of cross-like sails and arrow-like beaks, ‘Spectre-Bark’ distils its Coleridgean spirit to an eternity of albatross-slaying.

Hence the ‘Valse Triste’ pastel drawings where Catania reworks what Antje Klesse calls Peake’s ‘disproportionately elongated [...] wide-winged albatross’ soaring above the Mariner’s hardly discernible galleon (pp. 37/45) into a bird/bark conflict pivoted on a serial reiteration of its twirling stasis. Evoking Murray Krieger’s vision of Coleridge’s poem as ‘[an] opposition between stillness and motion’ (p. 282), the ‘Valse Triste’ series ominously revolves on a hovering/sailing waltz that Catania warps into ‘One Fell Swoop’. Similarly haunted by what Peter Larkin terms ‘[the] ballad schema[’s] repetition/compulsion’ (p. 15), ‘One Fell Swoop’ devolves into an equally antithetical but weirder series of juxtaposed vertical diptychs whose self-reflecting bird/bark static whirligigs intermesh into an x-ray crest of a Coleridgean un-Death’s chest. For by choreographing variations on the Flying

Dutchman's descent into endlessly stilled restlessness, 'One Fell Swoop' swirls its albatross-galleon Mariner to his Coleridgean equivalent's parallel damnation of eternal recurrence:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns:  
And till my ghastly tale is told,  
This heart within me burns.  
(ll. 583-86)

Theirs is Cain's Nietzschean curse, for just as Coleridge's Mariner, 'pass[ing] like night, from land to land' (l. 587), tenebrously enacts the relentless trekking of the damned, so does Catania's counterpart perpetually ply the Stygian wake of his Life-in-Death state. What 'One Fell Swoop's' black diptychs revealingly annihilate is 'the expected crepuscule' that Arden Reed astutely finds 'conspicuous[ly] absen[t]' (p. 197) in the *Rime*: 'The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out:/At one stride comes the dark' (ll. 199-200). Bursting from Coleridge's 'black cloud' (ll. 321/323), like the viscous sun sably soaking through the Mariner's ship in Hunt Emerson's comic-strip *Rime*, Catania's sombre diptychs thicken 'Black Blood', with its Mariner as blotched death-craft, into maelstroms of the snaky sublime. For Catania's black diptychs, true to the Coleridgean Mariner's identification with 'a thousand thousand slimy things' (l. 239), embroil bird and bark into a *totentanz* of coiling primordial slime. What Renée Riese Hubert sees as 'snake patterns' (p. 86) infesting Doré's *Rime* etchings slither into Catania's black diptychs to spawn patterns of calligraphic abstractions and 'boneless' blobs that spectrally intermesh into a Zen-like waltz of Coleridgean 'water-snakes' (l. 274). It is the nearest that Catania comes to visualise in the Kakemono vertical style what might inkily snake through Coleridgean 'black lips baked' (ll. 157/162). But whether 'One Fell Swoop's' dark diptychs contort into Van Goghian crows or wobble into Seurat-like blotches, they all ultimately intertwine into funeral wreaths for a Coleridgean Lamia of the high seas.

Equally elegiac are 'One Fell Swoops's' coloured diptychs that incarnate in hues of parallel Medusan dread the 'rich attire' (l. 279) that Catania's bird/bark Mariner appropriates from Coleridge's water-snakes. Significantly, just like the latter whose 'velvet black' coils (l. 280) sparkle in 'flash[es] of golden fire' (l. 282), the 'soot-choked' diptychs (l. 138) writhingly flush into the ballad's 'bloody Sun' (l. 112). It is as if 'Blood Mist's' Mariner, whom Catania sickly shades to a Monet-like sanguine smear, wriggles into 'One Fell Swoop's' red diptychs like Coleridge's 'western wave' to set them both 'afire' (l. 171). Stunningly electrifying, the red diptychs galvanise Procktor's relatively still black and orange *Rime* aquatint into what James A.W. Heffernan calls '[the] fire and blood *Rime* seascape' (p. 147) of Turner's equally explosive *Slavers*. What James B. Twitchell claims about 'iridescent red [being] more than the chromatic matrix of these works' also applies to Catania's scarlet diptychs, for they likewise 'force[...] us to the vortex' (pp. 104/105). Emulating their inky variants, the red diptychs revision the *Rime's* aestheticisation of Coleridge's own terror of being '[w]hirled about without a center – as in a nightmair'<sup>4</sup> by waltzing us into Turner-esque bloody blasts that ignite the Stygian spectrality of the Mariner's hellish heart into serpentine corpse-lights. For just as Coleridge's *Rime* 'burst[s] into life/[with] a hundred fire-flags sheen[ing] to and fro, and in and out' (ll. 314-315/317), Catania's red diptychs fierily bleed streamers of a tortuous *ignis fatuus* nature that contort bird and

bark into Coleridgean ‘death-fires danc[ing] at night [...] in reel and rout’ (ll. 128/127). What Larkin evocatively describes as Jones’ ‘dream-float[ing]’ *Rime* (p. 12) finds its weirdest counterpart in Catania’s vision of two bloody diptychs streaking their black variants’ slithering nightmare with flashes of entangled Coleridgean ‘lightning’ (ll. 326/330). Slicing through the ‘Phlegethon Galleon’'s black-scythe menace, the red diptychs distil their similarly flaring bird/bark Mariner to a sanguineous version of Coleridge’s ‘sliming things [...] crawl[ing]/Upon the slimy sea’ (ll. 124-125). Theirs is the black diptychs’ serpent soul, likewise coiling into a Coleridgean *sparagmós*.

Nor can the red diptychs, given their Coleridgean solar substance, ever uncoil their tragic sickly throes. Significantly, just as Coleridge’s sun shining through the ‘ribs [of] spectre-bark’ (ll. 185/203) ominously radiates the chilling heat of Life-in-Death, so does these diptychs inflict her ‘red lips’ stroke (l. 190) of ‘thick[ing] man’s blood with cold’ (l. 194). Reed’s astute remark to the effect that Coleridge’s sun ‘fails to melt the rime [...] for the very being of the text depends on the Mariner’s never being saved’ (p. 185) finds its ravishing evidence in these diptychs’ ‘awful red[ness]’ (l. 272). For like Coleridge’s Mariner who, to quote Reed again, ‘must go on rhyming and ‘existing’ in a state of rime’ (p. 185), Catania’s scarlet bird/bark counterpart coils his fiery blood into a Coleridgean waltz of unredeeming ice. Hence ‘One Fell Swoop’'s ‘wondrous[ly] cold’ (l. 52) white and blue diptychs that, true to the snaky essence of their pale and azure ‘Slithering Galleon’ equivalents, spectrally swell to undulating swarms of ‘snowy clefts’ (l. 55). Embracing what Riese Hubert labels the Doré Mariner’s ‘snow-covered destiny’ (p. 85), the white and blue diptychs propel the bird/bark Mariner to a *danse macabre* of ‘ice, mast-high’ (l. 53) squirming over sea and sky like Coleridge’s ‘rear[ing] water-snakes’ shaking off their ‘hoary flakes’ (ll. 274/276-77). But by filtering the equally snaky bird/bark Mariner of their black and red counterparts through a ‘ministry of frost’ (l. 72)<sup>5</sup>, the white and blue diptychs contort Coleridge’s ecstatic vision of the Maltese coastal sublimity<sup>6</sup> to the *Rime*’s concept of the sublime as ‘boundless or endless allness’<sup>7</sup> congealed in stifling ice:

The ice was here, the ice was there,  
The ice was all around:  
It crack’d and growl’d, and roar’d and howl’d,  
Like noises in a swoond (ll. 59-62)

What remains of Malta’s ‘aetherial Sea, [...] its *zerflossenes Eins*’<sup>8</sup> twirls into the ‘icy gusts’ of these diptychs’ Tabucchi counterpart<sup>9</sup>. These white and blue diptychs are nothing but the chilling apotheosis of ‘One Fell Swoops’'s kaleidoscopic obsession with anatomising the bird/bark Mariner’s rib-cage to see, Lear-like, what writhes within his Pollock-worm heart. For what these diptychs uncannily scry is Stygian fire and blood ceaselessly coiling into ice. Edward E. Bostetter’s view of the *Rime*’s realm as ‘the Christian universe gone mad’ (p. 194) culminates in these diptychs’ immortal sickness crawling in icebound splendour.

That Catania’s bird/bark Mariner unredeemingly spectralises into Reed’s unthawing vision of his Coleridgean equivalent as ‘more rime than person’ (p. 174) is further attested by the paleness of his

‘Charon Galleon’ apparition. For what the ‘Charon Galleon’ terribly textures is the chilling Life-in-Death’s ‘lepro[us] white[ness]’ (l. 192). Again, just as the Coleridgean Mariner’s ‘hoar beard’ (l. 619) attests to his perpetual plunge ‘below the kirk’ (l. 23), Catania’s *Todtenschiff* Mariner chills this Coleridgean kirk to a Böcklinean isle of the dead. Significantly, the ‘Icy *Toteninsel*’s ‘harbour-bay’ (l.472) looms as a Coleridgean Antarctic waste – the hoary haunt of the iceberg albatross. To this Dantean nowhere Catania’s ghost-galleon Mariner sullenly sails, never to transcend the glacial netherworld of the slain bird. For by imbuing Coleridge’s coastal hearth with unholy hoar, the ‘Icy *Toteninsel*’ crystallises the Mariner’s spectre-bark soul to an avian invisibility moulting Cocytus icicles. But the albatross resurges in the melancholic monoprint reworkings of the ‘Valse Triste’ series’ achingly named ‘Wailing Wave’. Echoing ‘Surf Soul’, with its tristful Charon sails ferrying its lamentable loss across Delamarean ‘foam haunted by the albatross’<sup>10</sup>, the ‘Wailing Wave’ monoprints surge the ghost-galleon Mariner to a reiterative Hokusai apocalypse of mournful willow wings. True to Peake’s humble belief that the *Rime* artist must ‘slide into [its] soul’ (p. 145)<sup>11</sup>, Catania empathically moults his seabird’s undead dirge in a never-breaking wave – for Coleridge’s albatross, unlike Keats’ nightingale, never soars away. But by grieving its elegy in Van Goghian recurrent swirlings, the ‘Wailing Wave’ series, like *Christabel*’s intermeshing of snake and dove, gyres the albatross’ swansong into its endlessly coiling strife. Poignant versions of ‘One Fell Swoop’’s pastel diptychs, the ‘Wailing Wave’ monoprints swell Catania’s spectral tryst with Coleridge’s Life-in-Death to a restless requiem. Pitched to the ‘Moonfleet’ galleon’s beckoning beak, we cannot but coil into the wave’s eternal spiral while we listen darkling.

## Saviour Catania

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> For the influence of John Cruikshank’s ‘strange dream’ on Coleridge, see Lowes, pp. 222-3.

<sup>3</sup> All line references to the *Rime* are from *S.T. Coleridge: Poems*, ed. Beer. These references appear after quotations in the text.

<sup>4</sup> See Coleridge, *Notebooks*, III, n. 3999, ed. Coburn.

<sup>5</sup> See ‘Frost at Midnight’, in *S.T. Coleridge: Poems*, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> See Twitchell, p. 90.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Coleridge’s view on the sublime, see *Letters, Conversations, and Recollections of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Thomas Allsop and reprinted in the notes to *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Shawcross, p. 309.

<sup>8</sup> For Coleridge’s vision of Malta’s ethereality as ‘melted ice’, see his *Notebooks*, II.9.58.

<sup>9</sup> See ‘Dream of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poet and Opium-Eater’, in Tabucchi, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> See ‘She’s me forgot’, the sad sailor song that Battle sings to Nod in de la Mare, p. 133.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Watney 145 from a radio talk first published in ‘The Listener’, 27 Nov. 1947.

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