

COLERIDGE REVISITED: ROCK VERSIONS OF “THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER” AND “KUBLA KHAN”

Lauro Meller*

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in Popular Music studies in the past few years, covering a number of approaches that range from sociological to historical, from linguistic to literary. In this paper, we will investigate how two flagships of English language poetry, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan”, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, were put into music respectively by rock bands *Iron Maiden* and *Rush* (who opted for calling their song “Xanadu”). For the analysis itself, we will use concepts both from theory of literature and music theory. We strongly recommend that the reading of this paper is done with access to the recorded versions, so that the process by which the poems made the leap from the printed page can be unveiled more easily. Last but not least, we hope this paper helps elucidate the similarities and differences between poetry and song lyrics, and also that it contributes to the insertion of Popular Music in the academic debate.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Coleridge’s strange and magnificent *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is one of the most visited pieces of English poetry by readers and specialists alike. It tells the story of a navigator who approaches a wedding guest in order to tell him his story. Bewitched by his glaring stare, the guest cannot help but listen. The Mariner then starts his narrative, giving account of the occasion when he strong winds deviated his ship to the glaciers of the South Pole, being fortunately saved by the guidance of an Albatross – “the bird of good omen”. In

* Doctoral Student in Literature – PUC-Minas, Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

a thoughtless act, the Mariner kills the bird. In revenge, and in a scornful manner, his shipmates hang the dead bird onto his neck, and mock him. Soon afterwards the adverse conditions are replaced by good weather, and so the sailors forgive the Mariner, blaming the Albatross for the ordeal inflicted by the ice storms. Thus, they become accomplices of the crime, and suffer a heavenly punishment for that: a drought falls over the crew. They suffer the effects of the scorching sun and a water shortage aboard, as they behold a useless ocean of *salty* water. Then, a ghostly ship carrying “Death” and “Life-in-death” approaches and they dice up the sailors’ lives – and “Life-in-death” gains the Old Mariner, whereas the rest of the crew are sacrificed. Alone on the ship, the Mariner contrasts his dead fellowmen – two hundred men whose dead yet glittering eyes seem to accuse him – and the simple, crawling, worthless creatures that abound in the sea, which, nevertheless, are *alive*. At this point he recognizes them as living creatures, creations of God, and blesses them. As a reward, the Creator sends a mighty downpour, that washes away his agony and relieves him from the thirst. Benevolent spirits then come to rescue him, and animate the sailors’ bodies so that the ship can be steered back home – but as soon as it reaches a point of some nearness to that familiar harbour, those very spirits flee and leave the protagonist by himself with the lifeless corpses. As the bodies drop dead for the second time, the ship starts to sink, and the Mariner is saved by a boat. Safely back in his homeland, he now must pay a penitence by retelling his saga daily, passing on the lesson that we must earnestly love all of God’s creatures.

British heavy metal band *Iron Maiden* released their version for “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in their 1984 *Powerslave* album. Having two members in the band eagerly interested in History – bassist Steve Harris, who penned most of the songs, and vocalist Bruce Dickinson, who worked as a History teacher before joining the group – their

involvement with Literature comes as no surprise. As a matter of fact, historical topics are to be found in profusion in the band's discography, ranging from the Pre-History ("To tame a land") to the Crimean War ("The Trooper"), from the Ancient Egypt ("Powerslave") to the Middle Ages ("The Duellists"), from the Inquisition ("Hallowed be Thy Name") to the Second Great War ("Aces High"). As for songs inspired by Literature, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is their second venture into the classics, since their 1981 version for Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue".

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", for its tone and length, is what we might call an epic poem. Here again the choice of this piece by the group is not unexpected. Heavy Metal music is often associated to an epic, heroic imagery that includes a *mise-en-scène* full of visual effects, explosions and leather-and-metal accessories that are reminiscent of the medieval suits of armour, not to mention a deafening sound volume only compared to the thunderous roar of bombs and cannons heard in battles. The grandiose musical accompaniment they forged to go with Coleridge's story only confirms this argument. The song is *not* a mere transposition of the original poem into music. Rather, it is an updated version, that although maintains some of its poetic language, has revitalized (and simplified) the story having in mind a 20th century, teenage audience. In fact, we believe *Iron Maiden* have greatly contributed to the dissemination of Coleridge's works through this recording, for most of their (as stated before, *teenage*) public only got an interest in the Romantic poet *after* listening to the song (me included). Because the poem is so long, they selected key passages and left aside those that played an ornamental role but which, if suppressed, would not compromise the plot's understanding as a whole.

In order to provide the reader a vague idea of how this process was carried out, we transcribe some excerpts in a comparative table, having in the first column Coleridge's,

original version, and in the second column *Iron Maiden*'s. Due to the length of the poem / song and to space constraints, we will restrict ourselves to analysing only up to the beginning of Part V (Out of VII) both because those first parts constitute the core of the story, and also because *Iron Maiden*'s Steve Harris focused on those more closely in his version.

PART I	
<p><i>An ancient Mariner meeteth three Gallants bidden to a wedding-feast, and detaineth one.</i> It is an ancient Mariner, And he stoppeth one of three. 'By thy long beard and glittering eye, Now wherefore stopp'st thou me ? <i>The Wedding-Guest is spell-bound by the eye of the old seafaring man, and constrained to hear his tale.</i> He holds him with his glittering eye-- The Wedding-Guest stood still, And listens like a three years' child : The Mariner hath his will.</p>	<p>Hear the rime of the Ancient Mariner See his eye as he stops one of three Mesmerises one of the wedding guests Stay here and listen to the nightmares of the Sea And the music plays on, as the bride passes by Caught by his spell and the Mariner tells his tale.</p>
<p><i>The Mariner tells how the ship sailed southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the Line.</i> <i>The Wedding-Guest heareth the bridal music ; but the Mariner continueth his tale.</i> <i>The ship driven by a storm toward the south pole.</i> And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he Was tyrannous and strong : He struck with his o'ertaking wings, And chased us south along. And now there came both mist and snow, And it grew wondrous cold : And ice, mast-high, came floating by, As green as emerald. The ice was here, the ice was there, The ice was all around : It cracked and growled, and roared and howled, Like noises in a swound ! <i>Till a great sea-bird, called the Albatross, came through the snow-fog, and was received with great joy and hospitality.</i> At length did cross an Albatross, Thorough the fog it came ; As if it had been a Christian soul, We hailed it in God's name.</p>	<p>Driven south to the land of the snow and ice To a place where nobody's been (And the music plays on, as the bride passes by caught by his spell and the Mariner tells his tale).</p> <p>Through the snow fog flies on the albatross Hailed in God's name, hoping good luck it brings.</p> <p>And the ship sails on, back to the North Through the fog and ice and the albatross follows on</p>

<p><i>The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen.</i> God save thee, ancient Mariner ! From the fiends, that plague thee thus !-- Why look'st thou so ?--With my cross-bow I shot the ALBATROSS.</p>	<p>The mariner kills the bird of good omen His shipmates cry against what he's done</p>
--	--

The musicians adopted a very fast *tempo* for this song, which affects the understanding of the lyrics, as the singer must pronounce the words very quickly. This steadiness of the *tempo* – or, put another way, the lack of *dynamics* in music – makes it difficult for the vocalist to *interpret* the words. These are rather spat out at high speed in an almost unintelligible way (a negative effect that is even more perceptible in the song's live recording – included in 1985 *Live After Death* album – in which Bruce Dickinson himself gets mixed up with the lyrics). Because it would be impractical to put the exact words of the poem into music, due to its length, one of the strategies adopted by Steve Harris was to mention or paraphrase the short notes that go along the stanzas. If the accommodation of the lyrics onto the music left a little to be desired in the intelligibility department, on the other hand the instrumental accompaniment of distorted guitars (in E minor), bass and drums fit perfectly, adding a lot of tension to the atmosphere suggested by the words. In time, Harris had to displace some passages of the original poem in his version, which is noticeable when we compare the two versions side by side.

<p>PART II</p> <p><i>His shipmates cry out against the ancient Mariner, for killing the bird of good luck. But when the fog cleared off, they justify the same, and thus make themselves accomplices in the crime.</i></p> <p><i>The fair breeze continues ; the ship enters the Pacific Ocean, and sails northward, even till it</i></p>	<p>(The mariner kills the bird of good omen His shipmates cry against what he's done) But when the fog clears, they justify him And make themselves a part of the crime.</p> <p>Sailing on and on and North across the sea</p>
--	---

<p><i>reaches the Line.</i></p> <p><i>The ship hath been suddenly becalmed.</i> Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down, 'Twas sad as sad could be ; And we did speak only to break The silence of the sea !</p> <p>Day after day, day after day, We stuck, nor breath nor motion ; As idle as a painted ship Upon a painted ocean.</p> <p><i>And the Albatross begins to be avenged.</i> Water, water, every where, And all the boards did shrink ; Water, water, every where, Nor any drop to drink. And every tongue, through utter drought, Was withered at the root ; We could not speak, no more than if We had been choked with soot.</p> <p><i>The shipmates, in their sore distress, would fain throw the whole guilt on the ancient Mariner : in sign hereof they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck.</i></p> <p>Ah ! well a-day ! what evil looks Had I from old and young ! Instead of the cross, the Albatross About my neck was hung.</p>	<p>Sailing on and on and North 'till all is calm</p> <p>(Spoken) "Day after day, day after day, we stuck nor breath nor motion <i>As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean</i> (The albatross begins with its vengeance) Water, water everywhere and all the boards did shrink Water, water everywhere nor any drop to drink."</p> <p>A terrible curse a thirst has begun</p> <p>His shipmates blame bad luck on the Mariner About his neck, the dead bird is hung.</p> <p>(And the curse goes on and on at sea / And the curse goes on and on for them and me)</p>
--	---

The musical structure goes unchanged for the second part, denoting sameness. This contrasts violently with the impressions passed by the poem / lyrics, for in this part several crucial happenings have already taken place, especially the memorable passage which is transcribed verbatim in the song, the one that quotes the verses "As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean". The feeling of unsuitability between music / words is compensated at the beginning of the fourth part, when the music stops with two big "bangs" that emulate the Mariner's excitement as shouts gleefully to draw his mates' attention to the ship that approaches them. This procedure will be repeated over this passage, and the descending scales, played as triplets in C-G-Gb-D-C / Am-G-Gb-D-Am also lend weight to the whole

scene. This tension mounts to the point where it cannot be sustained any longer, which coincides with the first climax of the poem, the part when Death wins the crew on dice.

A sombre melodic interlude then comes in, accompanied by the reading of some of Coleridge's original verses in which he describes the moment when the sailors silently drop down dead. In order to create an appropriate ambience for that part, the guitars and bass build ascending and descending melodic lines that are repeated over and over, emulating the movement of the sea, and causing the ship to creak. This is the most clearly representational passage in the song, for it includes the actual creaking sound, which causes the listener to visualise the silent ship crowded with inanimate corpses. Equally noteworthy is the choice for harmonic intervals that transmit a certain uneasiness, which replicates the Mariner's distress on the musical level. These are played on the bass in descending triplets in A, Db, F, and then in F#, A#, D, as the lead guitar plays ascending notes with the volume pedal in D, E, F, G, G#, E.

PART III	
<p><i>The ancient Mariner beholdeth a sign in the element afar off. At its nearer approach, it seemeth him to be a ship</i> With throats unslaked, with black lips baked, We could nor laugh nor wail ; Through utter drought all dumb we stood ! I bit my arm, I sucked the blood, And cried, A sail ! a sail ! <i>And horror follows. For can it be a ship that comes onward without wind or tide ?</i></p> <p>See ! see ! (I cried) she tacks no more ! Hither to work us weal ; Without a breeze, without a tide, She steadies with upright keel ! (...)When that strange shape drove suddenly Betwixt us and the Sun.</p> <p><i>The Spectre-Woman and her Death-mate, and no other on board the skeleton ship. Is that a</i></p>	<p>There, calls the mariner there comes a ship over the line</p> <p>But how can she sail with no wind in her sails and no tide.</p> <p>See... onward she comes Onwards she nears, out of the sun</p> <p>See... she has no crew She has no life, wait but there's two</p>

<p>DEATH ? and are there two ? Is DEATH that woman's mate ? (...) The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she, Who thicks man's blood with cold. <i>Death and Life-in-Death have diced for the ship's crew, and she (the latter) winneth the ancient Mariner.</i></p> <p><i>One after another,</i> One after one, by the star-dogged Moon, Too quick for groan or sigh, Each turned his face with a ghastly pang, And cursed me with his eye. <i>His shipmates drop down dead.</i> Four times fifty living men, (And I heard nor sigh nor groan) With heavy thump, a lifeless lump, They dropped down one by one.</p>	<p>Death and she Life in Death, they throw their dice for the crew She wins the Mariner and he belongs to her now. Then... crew one by one They drop down dead, two hundred men She... She, Life in Death. She lets him live, her chosen one. <i>[NARRATIVE]</i> "One after one by the star dogged moon, too quick for groan or sigh Each turned his face with a ghastly pang and cursed me with his eye Four times fifty living men (and I heard nor sigh nor groan), With heavy thump, a lifeless lump, they dropped down one by one."</p>
--	--

The Third, Fourth and (beginning of the) Fifth Part marks the poem's turning point and is represented musically by the transition of the slow interlude aforementioned to a section in which the distorted guitars – played with the right hand “muffling” the strings – generate an atmosphere of growing tension. In the poem, this corresponds to the part where the Albatross's curse is undone, it comes off from the Mariner's neck and sinks into the sea. He then falls asleep and dreams it is raining – only to be awakened by actual rain, as he is indeed blessed with a shower. Musically, this passage culminates with the (guitar) solo – which is normally the climax in any musical piece, regardless of its genre: classical music, jazz, blues, rock or heavy metal –, that is introduced by the word “rain” (from the verse “Then down in pours comes the rain”), which is mercilessly shouted in the song, followed by hysterical laughter, which is very much in accordance with the plot.

<p>PART IV</p> <p>Alone, alone, all, all alone,</p>	<p>Along with the sea creatures</p>
--	-------------------------------------

<p>Alone on a wide wide sea ! And never a saint took pity on My soul in agony. <i>He despiseth the creatures of the calm,</i> The many men, so beautiful ! And they all dead did lie : And a thousand thousand slimy things Lived on ; and so did I.</p> <p><i>But the curse liveth for him in the eye of the dead men.</i> The cold sweat melted from their limbs, Nor rot nor reek did they : The look with which they looked on me Had never passed away.</p> <p><i>By the light of the Moon he beholdeth God's creatures of the great calm.</i> <i>Their beauty and their happiness.</i> <i>He blesseth them in his heart.</i> <i>The spell begins to break.</i> The self-same moment I could pray ; And from my neck so free The Albatross fell off, and sank Like lead into the sea.</p>	<p>But they lived on, so did he.</p> <p>The curse it lives on in their eyes The Mariner he wished he'd die</p> <p>And by the light of moon He prays for their beauty not doom With heart he blesses them God's creatures all of them too. Then the spell starts to break The albatross falls from his neck Sinks down like lead into the Sea.</p>
<p>PART V</p> <p><i>By grace of the holy Mother, the ancient Mariner is refreshed with rain.</i> The silly buckets on the deck, That had so long remained, I dreamt that they were filled with dew ; And when I awoke, it rained.</p>	<p>Then down in falls comes the rain.</p>

The song then returns to the same harmonic structure seen in the first stanzas, until it reaches a conclusion, the same one to be found in Coleridge's poem: that it is through pain and suffering that a man can achieve wisdom, and this is a continuous process in life. Accordingly, the final chord is in E *minor*, playing a double role: to represent a feeling of discomfort or sadness and, because the first chord of the song, *thirteen minutes* earlier (which confirms the epic character of Heavy Metal) was also struck in that key, thus closing this endless circle of life-and-death, and representing the Mariner's eternal

condemnation to retell his story. This circular motion is represented in the poem by the fact that its very last verses lead us to the point where it all had started: the wedding guest and the Mariner part at the bridegroom's door.

<p>The Mariner, whose eye is bright, Whose beard with age is hoar, Is gone: and now the Wedding-Guest Turned from the bridegroom's door.</p> <p>He went like one that hath been stunned, And is of sense forlorn: A sadder and a wiser man, He rose the morrow morn.</p>	<p>The Mariner's bound to tell of his story To tell his tale weherever he goes To teach God's word by his own example That we must love all things that God made.</p> <p>And the wedding guest's a sad and wiser man And the tale goes on and on and on and on.</p>
--	---

Kubla Khan / Xanadu

“Kubla Khan”, alongside “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, is one of the most famous pieces of English Romanticism in Literature. The fact of it being written under the influence of opium adds to the mythical aura that involves this poem full of fuzzy images and fantastic visions. Kubla Khan was a Mongol ruler whose domain extended through vast parts of Asia. In the poem, determined to have and offer his entourage an earthly paradise, he builds a “pleasure dome” (an expression which contains an inevitable Freudian suggestion to a woman's breasts), where breathtaking views of nature and continuous feasts entertain the few privileged individuals who enter those premises. We will not delve into the numerous possible interpretative pathways of the literary poem – for that critical role has been undertaken by a multitude of scholars – but limit our analysis to a bird eye's view comparison between the original version of “Kubla Khan” and its musical adaptation, “Xanadu”, written by Canadian power-trio *Rush*.

The song was recorded in the 80s, and follows the same method adopted by *Iron Maiden* as for the transposition of the poem into song format, i.e., Rush wrote new lyrics

based on the poem, here and there transcribing some verses in order to make the source they had got inspiration from clear. Rush is not a Heavy Metal, but a Progressive Rock band, pertaining to the same “school” as Yes, Genesis, and Jethro Tull. These bands, which blossomed in the 70s, are marked by compositional refinement (classical instruction and a love for jazz not being unusual among those musicians), by lengthy songs and by narrative lyrics many times inspired in Mythology (“The Fountain of Salmacis”, by Genesis), Science Fiction (“Starship Trooper”, by Yes), or taken from ordinary issues, even somewhat prosaic ones, such as the beggar sung by Ian Anderson (from Jethro Till) in “Aqualung”.

The intro to “Xanadu” is reminiscent of programmatic music (such as Tchaikowsky’s “1812” or Debussy’s “La Mer”), in the sense that it clearly tries to suggest objects and images by using musical resources. Thus we hear a guitar with a heavy echo effect, sustained by a single low-key note on the keyboard – not to mention the chirping of birds that was added to the recording – which recreates a sort of Eden. This is followed by a *virtuoso* passage which, despite the obvious dexterity of the musicians, adds very little to the expressiveness of the song, leaving a sense of unsuitability. After all, the lyrics – as in Coleridge’s poem – talk about an Earthly paradise, and the aggressive drum rolls performed by Neil Peart, along with Geddy Lee’s high pitched, somewhat hysterical singing, although a joy to listen to on the technical level, are hardly convincing as a good musical frame to these particular words. Leaving that aside, the transition from the poem to the lyrics was more convincing, since one follows the other closely. Below we transcribe *Rush*’s version, “Xanadu”, in which they reformulate Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”:

“To seek the sacred river Alph / To walk the caves of ice / To break my fast on honey dew / And drink the milk of paradise...” / I had heard the whispered tales / Of immortality / The deepest mystery / From an ancient book. I took a clue / I scaled the frozen mountain tops / Of eastern lands unknown / Time and Man alone / Searching for the lost --- Xanadu / Xanadu --- To stand within / The Pleasure Dome / Decreed by Kubla Khan / To taste anew the fruits of life / The last immortal man / To find the sacred river Alph / To walk the caves of ice / Oh, I will dine on honey dew / And drink the milks of Paradise / A thousand years have come and gone / But time has passed me by / Stars stopped in the sky / Frozen in an everlasting view / Waiting for the world to end / Weary of the night / Praying for the light / Prison of the lost --- Xanadu / Xanadu --- Held within The Pleasure Dome / Decreed by Kubla Khan / To taste my bitter triumph / As a mad immortal man Nevermore shall I return / Escape these caves of ice / For I have dined on honey dew / And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Rather than paraphrasing the original poem, *Rush*'s version expresses the vision of a (post-)modern man seeking for a mythical place where he can find, once again, abundance and peace, a theme already treated in Literature by, for instance, Milton (*Paradise Lost*) and, in Brazil, by Manuel Bandeira (*Itinerário de Pasárgada*). The anxiety that marks modern man makes this approach readily comprehensible, after all we are living an age of uncertainty, where borders of all kinds – social, political, religious – are vanishing.

Perhaps a positive offshoot of that process is the intercommunication among artistic means of expression. The ancestral link between poetry and music, arts that were cut apart for some centuries since Gutenberg's invention, is giving signs of a new approach. By bringing these arts together, we hope to mark our interdisciplinary position, as well as to show that rock music can be a stimulant object of analysis in the academic sphere.

References

- COLERIDGE, Samuel Taylor. *A Balada do Velho Marinheiro / Kubla Khan*. (Ed. Bilíngüe). Trad. e notas Alípio Correia de Franca Neto. Cotia-SP: Ateliê Editorial, 2005.
- IRON MAIDEN. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. In: *Powerslave*. EMI, 1984. 1 CD (51:00 min): digital, estéreo.
- RUSH. Xanadu. In: *Exit... Stage Left*. Polygram / Anthem / Universal, 1981. 1 CD (76:54 min): digital, estéreo.