‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, a Ballad of the Scurvy

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There have been roughly four eras in the reception of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. In the first the poem was thought unintelligible, a cock and bull story in verse. The second saw the elaboration of various allegorical readings that traced the original sin of the birdslayer through the phases of its forgiveness. The third arose from applying post-Freudian and poststructuralist theories of the uncanny to the poem, and produced a mariner in the grip of the compulsion to repeat his unteachable tale. The last is the postcolonial reading which, following William Empson's hint (‘It is about adventure and discovery; it celebrates and epitomises the maritime expansion of the Europeans’), is still investigating the mariner's complicity in the slave trade. The purpose of this essay is to avoid allegory altogether, and to combine elements of the third and fourth readings into an explanation of the first.

Of the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* Coleridge believed the greater part 'had been sold to seafaring men, who having heard of the Ancient Mariner, concluded that it was a naval song-book, or, at all events, that it had some relation to nautical matters'. If this wasn't an example of disingenuous retrospection, and Coleridge really believed there was something in the ballad that might appeal to sailors, the nautical matters of the ‘Rime’ would fall, as Empson points out, into the categories of adventure and discovery rather than of trade and settlement. Although the mariner may anticipate the means by which ‘Western European society has sought to imprint its imperial and slave-owning image on the New World’, in the course of his voyage he makes no landfall and he does not traffic. He appears to have gone on a journey for no definite purpose, rather like William Dampier and Woodes Rogers in their privateering cruises through the Pacific, where a treasure ship was to be hoped for but not relied upon. Indeed it is on such a cruise that the poem was loosely based, George Shelvocke’s *A Voyage round the World by way of the Great South Sea*
According to Wordsworth, who remembered how he and Coleridge were short of money for a projected walking tour, and how they planned to write some verse for a quick sale, including a ballad of a sailor who kills a bird, the hint was taken directly from Shelvocke’s account: ‘I had been reading in Shelvocke’s Voyages a day or two before that, while doubling Cape Horn, they frequently saw albatrosses in that latitude, the largest sort of sea-fowl, some extending their wings twelve or thirteen feet. “Suppose”, said I, “you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary spirits of these regions take upon them to avenge the crime.”’

As it happens Wordsworth was indebted to Shelvocke for the whole idea. His entry into the Pacific Ocean was remembered like this:

In short, one would think it impossible that any thing living could subsist in so rigid a climate; and, indeed, we all observed, that we had not had the sight of one fish of any kind, since we were come to the Southward of the streights of Le Mair, no one sea-bird, except a disconsolate black Albitross, who accompanied us for several days, hovering us as if he had lost himself, till Hatley, (my second Captain) observing, in one of his melancholy fits, that this bird was always hovering near us, imagin’d, from his colour, that it might be some ill omen. That which, I suppose, induced him the more to encourage his superstition, was the continued series of contrary tempestuous winds, which oppress’d us ever since we had got into this sea. But be that as it would, he, after some fruitless attempts, at length, shot the Albitross, not doubting (perhaps) that we would have a fair wind after it. I must own, that this navigation is truly melancholy, and was the more so to us, who were by ourselves without a companion.

The dejection of the crew, Simon Hatley in particular, was well known on this run. Johann Reinhold Forster, who also shot an albatross in these Antarctic waters (diomedea palpebrata, or the sooty albatross), told of the mood in which he did it, a gloom unrelieved by the tedium of ‘water, Ice & Sky’: ‘I put on a good face, & wanted to shew a mind superior to all these inconveniences … but had my Shipmates had a Sight of my most private thoughts, they would have me found widely different, from what I wanted to appear.’ At the same point in the voyage Forster reports: ‘We now have several people, that have some scurbutic symptoms, which prove a Scurvy that is gone pretty far viz. Bad Gums, livid Spots, Eruptions, difficult breathing, contracted limbs, & a greenish greasy Scum on the