James Engell
reads
Coleridge's Ancient Mariner
(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)
by J. C. C. Mays

A READER CONSULTING THE BACK COVER OF *Coleridge's Ancient Mariner* sees my endorsement: "Can something fresh and filled with insights still be written on the *Ancient Mariner*—composition, revision, reception, reputation, legacy, biographical import, poetic experimentation, form, and perennial pull of delight and interpretation? Yes: Mays has done it. The intimacy of knowledge with Coleridge and his poem is unparalleled."[1] This review explains that enthusiasm. The book will attract readers hoping for illumination cast on cruxes of the poem, those seeking integration of the poem with Coleridge's career, and those simply regarding Coleridge as a famous poet (4)—something for everyone.

Coleridge's Ancient Mariner comprises eight chapters. The first takes bearings and charts a course. The second asks *what* the poem does. The third treats it as "a poem of the imagination" and, explaining *how* the poem performs its magic, relates it to others by Coleridge. Chapters 4 and 5 treat Wordsworth as collaborator, contributor, and critic, a constant if shadowy presence throughout its entire history. Chapter 6 addresses revisions and gloss, the seventh reception and reputation. Chapter 8 outlines current and possible future study and enjoyment and invokes recent poems, for example, by J. H. Prynne.

Mays's approach is not New Critical, though one senses that over time he has read closely many times. He quotes the poem with bare yet apposite frequency. A single "reading" is not produced—Mays claims that the poem resists any *comprehensive* reading. I agree. Using a Coleridgean distinction, he asserts that the poem acutely *apprehends* rather than *comprehends*, and, I would add, creates apprehension—unease and delight. Whatever moral the poem elicits stems from haunting and obsessive delight, not from a simple proverb, however true. Perhaps the Mariner voices it in half futility to console his own pain. "I argue that the poem is less about crime, punishment, and expiation . . . than a story of wonders and hardships endured that, at a late stage, discover a deeper level of guilt and fear" (35-6). While not entirely dismissive, "I am not convinced," says Mays, "by the view of the 'Ancient Mariner' as an evolving sequence of crime, punishment, and reconciliation" (41), certainly not in any flat and formulaic way, though these categories do not exclude wonders, hardships, guilt, and fear. "Many of the contradictions twentieth-century critics brought to light . . . do not ask to be reconciled. They

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are provocations that function as side paths slipping into the depths of the poem" (29). Or into the depths of the psyche? Is the fear embodied by the poem perhaps that these contradictions *cannot* be reconciled, that inner conflicts will repeat forever? Mays offers observations and judgments flowing from page to page, some sparkling bright waves, some deep in the text, others surging on contextual shores.

The most significant context is the relationship of the poem to Wordsworth. It occupies two of eight chapters. Mays sees the question of the supernatural at the "core" (107) of difference between the two poets. Wordsworth views the supernatural more in line with superstition, Coleridge as a kind of *outness* expressing inexplicable elements rising from the psyche, especially involving fear and dread. The poem "caps the lengthy dialogue [between the two men] more conclusively than the *Biographia*" (9). Mays is a bit hard on the *Biographia*: "the problems Coleridge discovered in the writing of the 'Mariner' were philosophical and psychological by turns, and revisiting the circumstances of the poem in the *Biographia* brought no solution" (51). Maybe; the *Biographia* was a step toward solutions, or at least toward some reconciliations, a necessary personal step. And if a "solution" rests in later prose, it should be identified explicitly, as should the specific philosophical and psychological problems.

Mays states, "This book is concerned with" what he calls "the pleasure the poem itself offers," not any hunt for correspondences between the poem and real events or locales (though he makes a case for Ilfracombe as the harbor envisioned). Least of all is this another search for "sources." The book addresses "the make-up of Coleridge's poem, its ideas, its complicated interrelation with poems written by Wordsworth, its different versions, the ways it has been read differently during its 200-year history, and its relation to poems of a similar kind in the present day" (6). Mays asserts, "The poem in question asks its readers to perform an imaginative act, to disarm their mundane search for explanation. It means nothing unless one allows oneself to be spellbound and works from there" (156). The "Ancient Mariner" exhibits no irritable reaching; it possesses the negative capability of imaginative expression.

The book, along with Mays's *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* and his extraordinary edition of the poetry, help to alter Coleridge's reputation and reception, most specifically in pointing out that as a productive mind Coleridge's powers did not decline in either prose or verse, and that his later writing is among his best, including a number of late poems. The "Ancient Mariner" is part of a life-long endeavor and development: "a fresh look at what he wrote, alongside his verse" will demonstrate "that his end follows from his beginning and casts a backward light." Mays's edition of the *Poetical Works*—"and the 'Ancient Mariner' in particular—will be integrated into the larger body of work containing philosophy and theology as well as politics and criticism." In "liveliness and originality" (158-9) the late poems match and complement the late prose.

Mays may perhaps underestimates how much this view has now been adopted by Coleridgeans, though he is right that old prejudices about Coleridge's career and canon still populate the consciousness and teaching of literary professionals in schools and universities, professionals relying on anthologies that often repeat a version of Coleridge's prose and verse sixty years old, largely uninformed by the massively rich *Collected Coleridge*. With understatement, Mays scolds Princeton University Press for not helping to get the full, vibrant Coleridge recognized. I agree and urged Princeton to do that three decades ago. The books are affordable only for libraries, well-heeled ones. Only *Biographia Literaria* has been issued in paperback. There seems no plan to put the edition online in searchable text for free, as Yale has done with its Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Johnson editions, or for a fee, which Oxford has done for numerous editions. The Bollingen six-volume *Poetical Works* in the *Collected Coleridge* costs $990 (£824.85); the two-volume reading text of the poems is $330 (£274.95).

Everywhere the book bristles with insight and critical intelligence. Coleridge came to the poem "with earlier abandoned projects still in mind, like his project for a sequence of 'Hymns to the Sun, the Moon, and the Elements' . . . his reading in the exploration of 'high latitudes' and the Gnostic tradition, his interest in metrical experiment . . . and all the personal concerns that made his understanding of (for instance) the inheritance of guilt different from Wordsworth's." But, "Luckily, this time, the narrative outline was able to contain the divergent elements that poured into it" (81). Mays traces simple keywords in the poem, how elaborated, how weighted and woven, they become. Since the gloss (1817) and the poem cannot be read simultaneously, they produce a "literally unreadable version" that makes "the poem even sadder and wiser" (9).

The poem is not entire, nor complete in its story or ethical dimensions. "Indeed, the way Coleridge does not get everything into the poem is both its theme and the reason that it is so haunting" (11). Bewitching sound and communicative sense elevate physical senses to a spiritual level, to the numinous (e.g., 42–44). This itself *is* a form of reconciliation embodied in eye and ear, though reaching higher: "Coleridge's numinous spreads and corruscates are full of *enérgeia*" (42).

Mays joins distinguished critics: Seamus Perry, Gregory Leadbetter, Robert Penn Warren, Jack Stillinger, Patrick Keane, I. A. Richards, John Livingston Lowes, and more. But Mays presents the most encompassing treatment. He does not discuss Hartman on the glosses, or Barth on religion, nor other critics such as Bostetter and George Watson, though he includes many in the bibliography. Yet, this book is not intended as a critical compendium. It treats the poem as the supreme gift of Coleridge as poet, a central document in his relation to Wordsworth, and an achievement with unparalleled appeal to different audiences over centuries. Coleridge emerges as a poet often misunderstood, too easily categorized, and whose career has been falsely conceived as moving from success to failure, or sporadic resuscitation.

The title, *Coleridge's Ancient Mariner*, not *Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner,"* suggests that the Ancient Mariner is also the person, and that this person is Coleridge himself, an identification that Coleridge could encourage. But Mays resists such direct identification, the Mariner is his own man not Coleridge's alter ego. This follows the spirit of David Perkins's criticism. Mays does not treat the poem as autobiography. He recognizes that the poem and others he associates with it ("Christabel," "The Ballad of the Dark Ladiè," "Love," and "Alice du Clós"—though *not* "Kubla Khan") involve "an innate sense of compromise and separation; a troubling speck of doubt and frailty; its causes and implications, psychological, philosophical, and theological," issues that "haunted Coleridge's thinking and writing throughout his life" (12).

Even though Mays contends that Coleridge largely wrote poetry to grapple with "personal questions that resisted permanent answers" (68), he avoids the psychobiographical. Yet, such "personal questions" were not purely intellectual or abstract. Some were deeply seated in Coleridge's own personal experience and conflicts. Mays hints at this, for example, when he says that Coleridge in defining imagination was "concerned to define a quality in his friend [Wordsworth] that he himself lacked, or possessed in a way connected with his own anxiety" (50). Yet, connection with that anxiety, and why such anxiety existed, are not much pursued.

It perhaps will be surprising to hear that Coleridge did not "finish" "Christabel" because it was already finished (67), but Mays believes that Coleridge was throughout an "experimental" poet, not a "professional" one (ix), not with ambition as Wordsworth was (18–21). Coleridge was "writing primarily for himself" (15) and "to please only himself or likeminded others" (10). "The poems he wrote in the wake of the 'Ancient Mariner' were written for himself, along different lines, while he concentrated on his grand philosophical project, his Magnum Opus" (100). Again, "Coleridge wrote less verse after the 'Ancient Mariner' because he had less need to do so" (40). "The 'Ancient Mariner' is a good example of the way Coleridge made poems 'ingenuously' as a process of discovery, thinking of them more in terms of their process than with an eye on how the finished product might be received. It left him beginning more poems than he finished, as many critics like to observe, but what remained unfinished in one way was in another way better said" (135).

One can qualify this. One need not decide between the view, on the one hand, that Wordsworth's behavior toward Coleridge with regard to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) sent "Coleridge into a spiral of drug dependency" (100) and dashed Coleridge's hope to be primarily a poet; or, on the other hand, that Coleridge was confident enough always to rely on his own instincts and to write verse without regard to its wider reception. There is truth in both views, especially over time. Mays corrects for what he judges over-emphasis on the first view. Fair enough, though it is hard to see Coleridge so self-reliant that he always wrote poetry without regard to the opinions of others. If the opinion was Wordsworth's, it certainly mattered. Mays is right to insist that Coleridge

wrote poetry for personal purposes, from his own needs and out of his own experiences, thoughts, and feelings in a manner that some professional poets do not. Yet, Coleridge liked to be thought of as a poet, he cared deeply about his verse; he began his own epitaph with the idea of being—or having once been—a poet foremost. Who knows what would have happened if Wordsworth had included "Christabel" in *Lyrical Ballads*? Was Coleridge, as Mays says, actually "glad"—*glad*—"to relinquish whatever claims he had in favour of Wordsworth's ambition to be the great poet of their age" (18)?

Still, Mays has looked into the workshop of Coleridge's poetic practice more extensively than any critic. His object is not how Coleridge's poetry as a whole, or the "Ancient Mariner" particularly, directly connects to his philosophy, religion, or other myriad interests, though Mays affirms that the poetry makes such connections. Rather, Mays seeks the workings of Coleridge's individual approach to poetry as a manner of personal feeling and thinking, a working out of things that *cannot* be set down for the understanding but remains and will *always* remain subject to imagination. The fact that for Coleridge Shakespeare subsumes and implicitly expresses philosophy, science, religion, and most everything else, does not mean that Coleridge devoted himself to that kind of poetic career. Instead, writing poetry becomes for him an experiment, an experience without determined ends, and once that experience offered diminishing returns, he would turn more in other directions. Of course, the Mariner, caught by experience and captured by trauma, must tell his story over and over again, and this reveals another side of Coleridge the poet, his obsessiveness, the magnetic pull of dark imaginings, especially prohibited ones dealing with evil or mystery, or a rivaling of God. This has roots in certain obsessive reading as a child, so obsessive that his father burned that reading.

"In short, although the concept of the numinous is useful in comparing Coleridge's sense of the supernatural with that of, say, Wallace Stevens, there is a yawning gulf between the original and the present developed senses of the word. For Coleridge it designates something very close and ever present: another world both above and below the one in which he exists, both elevated and subliminal, from which intimations of both joy and dread emanate" (176). It would at least be plausible to ask if the "Ancient Mariner" and the Mariner's obsessive retelling of his tale relate in some psychological way to Coleridge's repeatedly observing the traumatic anniversary of October 4, the night, as he remembered, of his quarrel with Frank, lunging at him with a knife, spending the night in storm by the River Otter, and also the date, two years later, that he marked as his father's sudden death. He observed that anniversary (associated with other deaths in his family, including William's on the eve of his wedding) with publications appearing on that date (*Robespierre* in 1794, *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798), as well as his own and Wordsworth's marriages, with reading "Christabel" to William and Dorothy on that date in 1800, and publishing "Dejection" on that date in 1802: celebratory joy and the specter of fear and dread together (see, for example, Stephen M. Weissman, *His Brother's Keeper*

[1989]). Fear and dread suffuse the "Ancient Mariner" and it is one set of words that Mays examines with acuity and profit. "I am inclined to read the foreshadowing of the ending in Part 5 in relation to the words 'fear' and 'dread' that enter the poem in the surrounding context. The poem—like all the verse Coleridge wrote with few exceptions—is consciously prompted by feeling, not ideas (CL 2:961), and he might have said of the "Mariner" as a whole, 'I see it feelingly' (*King Lear* IV vi 150)" (38).

The "Ancient Mariner" fosters perpetual experience, something never ending, perhaps because it is a poem of "pure imagination." The "restless faculty of *Imagination*" (W 131) discovers that poetry best serves its restlessness. The poem portrays penance, a forced repetition with varied listeners, yet within those limits exists immense readerly freedom. In the "Ancient Mariner," imaginative details and images exhibit correspondences with the particulars of *any* personal life or historical record. The poem has been connected with Christianity, slavery, disease, his brother Frank's voyage to India, guilt, remorse, forgiveness, prayer, pantheism, far-flung geographies, locales in the West County, morals simple and reductive, a panoply of recondite "sources," and genius for creating hypnotic variations of sound, sense, music, and spell.

The poem sets an almost endless agenda for contemplating life, experience, will, and action. It voices an intuitive feeling for themes and issues that Coleridge would pursue in other forms of writing. The poem lives through its specificity but simultaneously through its uncertainties and indeterminacies; these are suggestive, each one a possibility, not a series of trails with all of them false save one.

This review has dwelt little on masterfully distilled sections devoted to reception, imagery, poetic form, revision, editing (including a bibliographical study and reasoned defense of Mays's own edition for the *Collected Coleridge*), and illustration. All these aspects are richly present. Finally, the index is a thing of useful beauty. This book will not be subject to the literary concept du jour. It will last because it says many lasting and important things about one of the great poems in the language, and one of its great poets.