Justin Shepherd

reads

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and three other poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The Folio Society 2010; illustrated by Harry Brockway

1,000 copies. £450.00.

THIS EDITION OF *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* and the three poems in the *Christabel* volume of 1816, is part of the new Folio Society series of highly-priced limited editions. It is a stupendous volume in all senses, in size, in weight and in production values and is very different from the normal, far more modest Folio Society editions, in which both illustrations and text are conventionally reproduced. Although *The Rime* has been a favourite of the book trade since David Scott's first attempt at illustration in 1831-2, there have been far fewer attempts to illustrate *Christabel* or *Kubla Khan*. It was a masterstroke on the part of Joe Whitlock-Blundell at the Folio Society, a genuine Coleridge enthusiast, to include all of the great visionary poems in this, perhaps the most ambitious illustrated Coleridge since Doré. It is surprising that *Kubla Khan*, in particular, has been so little attempted. Its famous preface gives a textbook account of 'eidetic' imagery, that unusual mental faculty which psychologists distinguish from normal visual imagination in that, as Coleridge writes, visual images 'rise up as things' rather than as mental impressions. Book illustration, in a sense, makes us all 'eidetikers'; hence, perhaps its power. However, weak book illustration of familiar and powerful poems can be positively harmful. One thinks of some of the truly dreadful illustrations of Wordsworth. I recently saw an American late-nineteenth century gift book of the *Intimations of Immortality* Ode in which the poet was dressed in knickerbockers with what looked like the beam from a miner's lamp emanating from his head. It will take time, alas, for that image to fade.

Coleridge's relations with publishers, with the exception of Joseph Cottle, were never good. One thinks of the chapter of disasters which surrounded the publication of *Biographia Literaria* and *Sibylline Leaves*, for example. He replied as follows to his first illustrator, David Scott, who had written requesting help in finding a publisher: 'At no time of my life had I much intercourse with booksellers or publishers—*the Trade*, as they call themselves…and my little experience has been of the most unfortunate kind…'.[1] However, he was generally positive about Scott's actual designs, except the fact that the mariner was wrongly characterised on the voyage as an old man. His general comments to Scott on the illustration of literary works, later summarised by Scott's brother, are interesting. Coleridge draws a distinction between literal illustration and imaginative recreation, which is itself a reworking of his

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[1] Quoted in Robert Woof and Stephen Hebron, 'Catalogue: The Illustrated Mariner', *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, the Poem and its Illustrators*, ed. Robert Woof, Stephen Hebron, Seamus Perry (The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, 2006), 35.

division into 'poetry as Descriptive, or dealing with outward nature, and Imaginative, or dealing with the forms of things in the mind."[2] This distinction is still helpful in categorising illustrators of Coleridge. David Jones belongs

Upon the whirl, where sank the ship,
The boat spun round and round;

firmly in the second category of imaginative recreation while Edward A. Wilson occupies centre stage in the first, providing literal illustration. Harry Brockway's designs are in my view very distinguished additions to the canon, occupying a tantalising middle ground. His designs are highly expressive and

[2] *Ibid.* 38.

fully imagined, while remaining faithful, where necessary, to the 'facts' of the text.

The book has been commercially produced to very high standards. Its cloth-bound solander box measures 14 x 12 x 2.5 inches. The book with its gloriously ornate cover of red, silver and gold foil nestles securely in this box and measures 13 x 9.75 inches. There is a vellum quarter binding and spine, with the title calligraphically designed and blocked in 22-carat gold. The top edge is gilded. The text is printed only on the recto, four stanzas to a page in 24-point Founder's Caslon, with fifteen illustrations tipped in on the verso with the addition of a frontispiece and a signed and numbered limitation print in black and white, printed directly off the block, making seventeen illustrations in all with the addition of further smaller end pieces and vignettes. Thus there are a good number of large blank white pages to offset the ornate exterior.

The sumptuousness of the binding is undeniably impressive and seems somehow appropriate to these richest and strangest of all poems. However, what of the actual designs? Simon Brett, an authority on wood engraving as well as a leading wood engraver himself, writing in *Multiples*, the journal of the Society of Wood Engravers, says that Harry Brockway's full-page wood engravings are among the best of the many fine things he has done. For me, with one or two reservations, they are among the most successful and satisfying of all modern versions of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and set the standard by which future attempts to illustrate the three poems in the 1816 *Christabel* volume will be judged.

Harry Brockway was kind enough to spend an afternoon with me in his house in Glastonbury, talking about the Coleridge project and showing me many of his sketches, early ideas and wood blocks. I am extremely grateful to him for sparing his time and especially for very generously allowing me to take away on loan his copy of the final publication. It is, of course, far from self-evident that illustrators are true readers. It is no coincidence, for example, that both David Jones and Mervyn Peake, the most distinguished twentieth century illustrators of *The Rime*, were both writers themselves, who engaged fully with the poem and reinterpreted the poem in their own idiosyncratic ways. Harry Brockway is certainly a reader. He spoke to me of carrying around as a teenager a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* and his powerful wood engraved Dostoevsky illustrations, done years later, reflect this early enthusiasm. He said that he prefers illustrating poetry partly because he prefers to keep up a high frequency of illustrations. He pointed out that in a novel of five hundred pages one has to wait rather long for a picture to appear. I was interested that this was a real concern to him. Indeed he said that his first consideration when starting work on a project was to determine an even spread of illustrations throughout a volume and he referred to his pleasure in those fat, profusely illustrated books of childhood in which one never had to wait long for a picture. Another reason he prefers illustrating poetry is because it gives him

more freedom. In a long novel, he pointed out, it is easy to miss something and thus create an image which is in conflict with a small but significant detail in the text. This creates a disturbance or momentary loss of faith for the reader, who needs, as Coleridge pointed out, to maintain the suspension of disbelief at all times. Brockway's Coleridge illustrations most unusually marry sensitive imaginative interpretation with respect for the text. In this volume there are also shared motifs in the designs for all the poems, so that the volume hangs together stylistically.

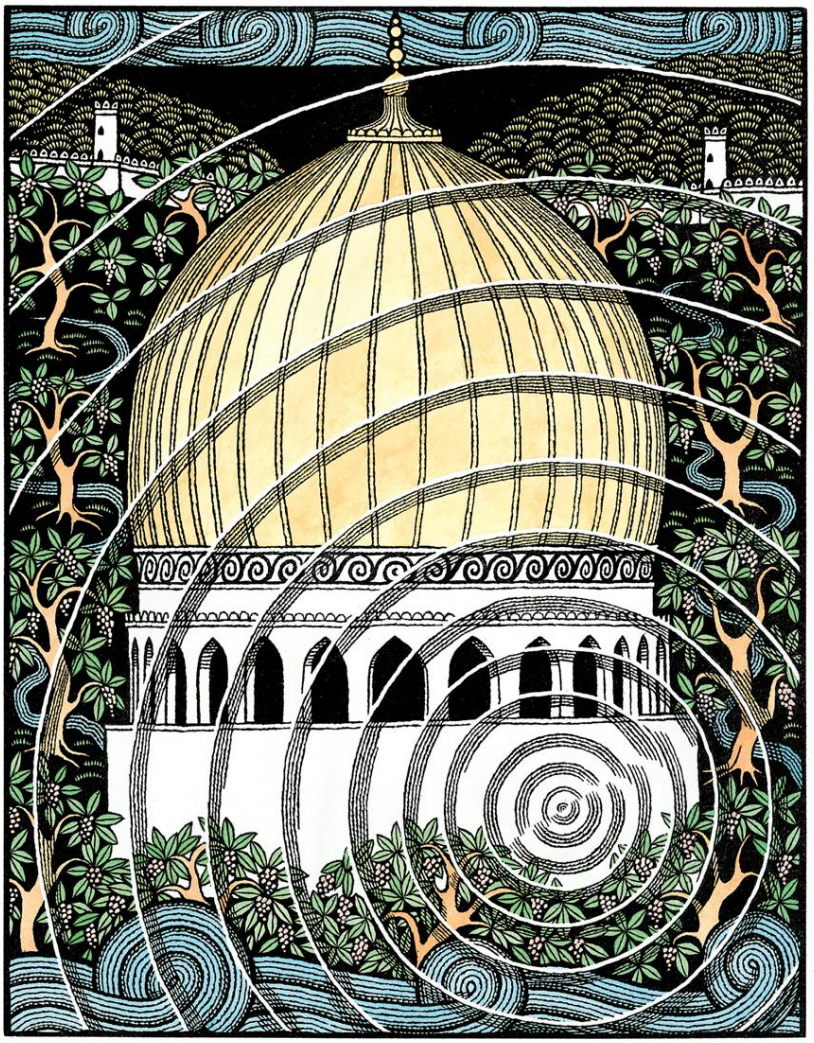
The limitation print at the front of the book, the only one printed in black and white off the block and the only one on the recto, is signed and numbered. (It took the artist two full days' work just to sign these. He says he sometimes find himself signing 'Happy Birthday' when he gets tired.) It is of an albatross in full flight above a swirl of abstract curling lines, which is the dominant motif of the entire volume. These abstract shapes are suggestive of the sea, of clouds, of hair and so on. A broken-up image of a ship is just to be made out in the background. This double spread works beautifully against the grey of the paper and the decorative swirling motif framing the print. The frontispiece is, like all the remaining images, a hand-coloured wood engraving conventionally printed, rather than printed off the block. It shows the mariner about to shoot the albatross and is somehow both sculptural and dynamic, with a pronounced diagonal tilt to the whole design, as if one is on board ship. Each one of the seven sections of the poem receives one illustration and I was interested to see how the artist had marked up a typescript of the poem against the lines which had most caught his imagination. The pictures participate in the narrative but also comment and enlarge upon it. A particularly unusual image is that of the becalmed ship: a Portuguese Man-of-War with trailing tentacles floats beneath a reddish ship. ('Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs/Upon a slimy sea.') There is also a powerful image of suffering in the shape of the mariner straining his neck muscles to support the weight of the albatross. However, Brockway's special achievement in these illustrations is to find a visual language for the angelic spirits which accompany the dead. Two of the images include these spirits, filling out a dimension to the poem usually ignored or fumbled by illustrators. The final full-page illustration of the sinking of the spinning boat in a 'whirl' is also very memorable. Not only has the artist found a crystal-clear concrete form for a dreamlike moment in the poem, but he has also been most punctilious in respecting the text. Whereas in my experience of teaching this poem most readers tend to blur the detail at this point, Brockway has ensured that all the figures mentioned in the text are there in the picture doing what Coleridge says they are doing in a convincing manner: the mariner at the oars, the Hermit praying, the Pilot's boy going crazy and the Pilot himself in 'a fit', frothing slightly at the mouth. This illustration is a good example of the artist's ability to find precise but expressive images for what Coleridge only verbally gestures at, while staying close to the text when this is required.

Whereas the three gallants or wedding guests of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are Elizabethan, Brockway draws out the Gothicism of *Christabel*. The familiar swirling shapes are there once again in the oak tree and the night sky, but the

… she unbound
The cincture from beneath her breast:
Her silken robe, and inner vest,
Dropt to her feet, and in full view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side-

dresses of Christabel and Geraldine are medieval or perhaps Pre-Raphaelite in style. There are five strong full-page images to the poem. The Samuel Palmeresque woods of the Quantocks can be glimpsed through the castle

windows and Brockway has brought out the human drama of the poem, particularly in the key moment of Part One, when Geraldine disrobes. This is a frankly erotic image, vaguely reminiscent of Eric Gill in style. Brockway skilfully uses his technique to suggest scales on one side of Geraldine's body, 'Behold! her bosom and half her side—…', picking up Coleridge's own suggestion in his pencilled addition on at least one copy, 'It was dark and rough as the Sea-Wolf's hide.' The end piece to Part One shows the two women sleeping peacefully in each other's arms.



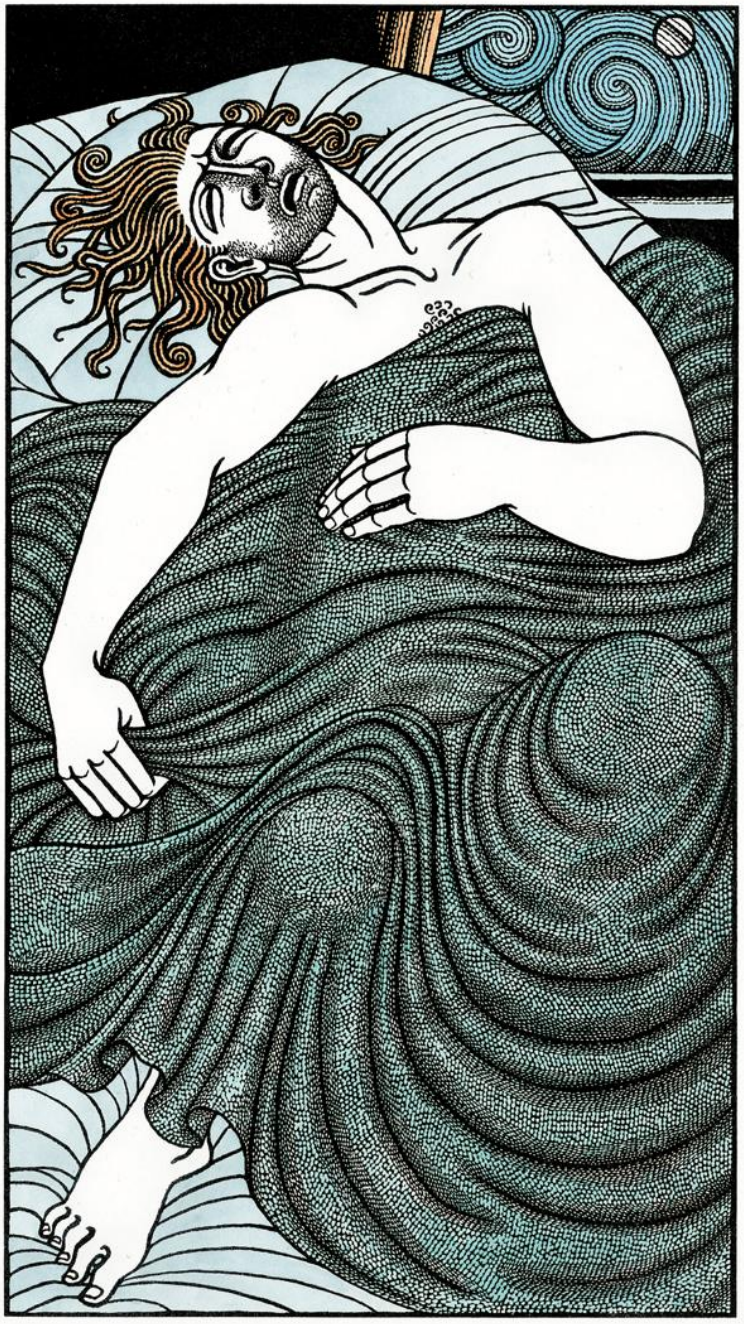
In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:

The artist draws upon the preface to *Kubla Khan* in the first of the two full-page illustrations to the poem. This shows the pleasure-dome, the sinuous rills and the enclosed garden, with the swirling motif suggesting a river, but the whole

image is daringly broken up by a series of concentric rings or ripples spreading from the bottom right hand corner evoking the words about memory in the preface: 'all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast…'. This strikes me as a sensitive attempt to ensure the focus is as much on the act of imaging as the image itself and is absolutely in sympathy with both the poem and its framing preface. The second illustration is of the mighty fountain and the sacred river. The artist says that he deliberately referenced psychedelic styles in this image, to which of course his swirling motif is perfectly adapted. The 'huge fragments' are there, the 'cedarn cover' is there and, just recognisable, is a tiny image of the wailing woman in the bottom corner, utterly overwhelmed by the scale of the natural world around her. *The Pains of Sleep*, the pair to *Kubla Khan*, is illustrated with just one haunting image of the sleeper, writhing in his bed. It is simple, dark and very powerful.

This book is a serious attempt to do these great poems justice and it can, for the most part, be deemed a success. I have, however, some reservations. The first and most serious is the decision to colour the engravings. Wood engraving is essentially a black and white medium and the colours chosen here are generally pale and slightly insipid. With the exception of one or two of the images, colour seems to add little, although this view may be a conservative one. My second reservation is one which Simon Brett has pointed out: there seems an awful lot of white paper. It is not so much that one feels the book is being bulked out, but that one has to turn over a lot of pages to enjoy the text and images. I have checked the pagination against facsimiles of the first editions and there are around twice as many pages in this new Folio Society edition as were originally needed for the four poems. My final reservation is that there is no note on the text. *The Rime* is based on the 1834 text, with the gloss, but this is nowhere made clear. The whole volume in fact uses the texts printed in Richard Holmes's selection.

In conclusion, this volume will bring a very great deal of pleasure to anyone with £450.00 to spend. Book Art purists may quibble and feel that there is something slightly overblown about the project, but Coleridgeans will rejoice that the Folio Society have had the courage, enterprise and ambition to set these poems off so magnificently and, especially, to have included in such a major illustrated edition the three poems from the 1816 *Christabel* volume. Harry Brockway's illustrations to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are distinguished additions to a long tradition. His illustrations to the three other poems set new standards by which subsequent attempts will be judged. It is to be hoped that the Folio Society will bring out in due course a more affordable edition in black and white. Meanwhile, interested readers can track down Harry Brockway's website (www.harrybrockway.com), where they will find some at least of his wood engravings for this book.



Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me
Distemper's worse calamity