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reads
Mariner: A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017)
by Malcolm Guite

MALCOLM GUITE'S *MARINER* IS SOMETHING OF A PARADOX—simultaneously engaging, imaginative, and conventional. His reading excels far more as a biographical narrative of Coleridge's life than as a critical interpretation of Coleridge's poem. Guite, not surprisingly, reads *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as an allegory of the Christian fall and redemption. His bold move, however, is to extend this allegory to Coleridge's life, reading Coleridge's early and later life through the imaginative lens of the poem and vice versa. I was at first skeptical of this biographical and allegorical approach, and while the method raises important critical issues that Guite never acknowledges or resolves, the approach (even with its limitations) brings both the poem and the poet to life in fresh ways. While I am not convinced that the poem itself is redemptive, the energy of Guite's biographical allegory feels true to the spirit of Coleridge: not without its critical imperfections, and certainly not exhaustive in its treatment of Coleridge's intellectual life and influences, but remarkably insightful and thought-provoking in animating and inspiriting Coleridge's personal, poetic, and spiritual journey.

Guite's approach is to read Coleridge himself as the mariner, and to interpret the poem through Coleridge's journey before and after the poem's initial composition for *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) while relying extensively on Coleridge's 1817 revision. Within Guite's traditional Christian allegory, the comparison works well. The mariner in the poem recounts the most extreme journey of fall, isolation, renewed vision, and (problematic) redemption, exploring the outer limits of physical and spiritual existence, beyond what is conceivable, and Guite connects this to Coleridge's own journey (mostly after the composition of the *Ancient Mariner*) through addiction and alienation towards eventual reconciliation and renewed faith and imagination. The book maps Coleridge's personal relationships especially well, including the influence of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, his domestic relationships with Sara and their children, his friendship with Sara Hutchinson, and the devastating effects of opium. Guite is unsparing in dramatizing Coleridge's culpability and the collateral damage of his personal choices—all of which Coleridge himself felt keenly—while also crediting Coleridge for recognizing the destructive alienation emerging in modern society and highlighting the productivity Coleridge eventually recovers with *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), *Biographia Literaria* (1817), and *Aids to Reflection* (1825). Coleridge again finds productivity within the context of deeply personal relationships, notably Dr. Gillman and his family.

Guite structures the book in two parts. Part One, "The Growth of a Poet's

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Mind," recounts Coleridge's life and development before composing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. It is a helpful prequel to the book's main event that skillfully brings to life the young Coleridge's early poetic and intellectual development. Guite draws special attention to the formative influence of the church, nature, and philosophy, as well as the important network of friends that shaped Coleridge's early poetry, politics, and religion. Guite correctly sees connection in all of this, with the young Coleridge already seeking to integrate faith, imagination, and culture, with an emerging spirituality focused on nature, friendship, and the divine. This section does a good job situating *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in relation to Coleridge's other major poems, notably "Kubla Khan" and the conversation poems, and highlights the spirituality present in the poems. Part Two, "The Mariner's Tale," follows the seven parts of the 1817 poem and maps the mariner's narrative onto Coleridge's subsequent life. With each chapter, Guite correlates his reading of the mariner's experience with major crises, turning points, and developments in Coleridge's life, focusing primarily on the traumatic years between 1798 and 1817, with special emphasis on the affects of addiction on Coleridge's health and relationships, and then concluding with the measured equilibrium that Coleridge finds at Highgate in his final years.

There is much to applaud in all of this. *Mariner* effectively portrays Coleridge's interpersonal magnetism, his skill at captivating others and drawing them into his orbit, and the intense role of friendship in Coleridge's creative process, both for good and for ill. While unoriginal in its allegory, Guite's reading of the poem is not without skill, although he accepts the poem and its gloss too much at face value as an archetypal dramatization of fall and redemption through imagination, prayer, and renewed vision. Guite connects this salvation story to Coleridge's personal struggle with addiction, his spiritual journey, and his concerns about modernity. There is insight in Guite's dramatization of this inner struggle within the poem and in Coleridge's personal development that builds on Molly Lefebure's classic work to illustrate the psychology of addiction in striking detail, both in Coleridge's life and in the poem.[2]

Guite's biographical narrative offers a compelling integration of the early and later Coleridge that recovers Coleridge's lifelong faith and devotional spirituality. Just as Jeffrey Barbeau uncovers Coleridge's lifelong attention to Scripture and Bible-reading,[3] Guite recaptures the importance of prayer for Coleridge and the pivotal role of prayer in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Guite traces the devotional spirituality present throughout Coleridge's life, and he connects the early poem's spirituality to Coleridge's later theology of imagination in a way that is reminiscent of J. Robert Barth's approach in *The Symbolic Imagination*. Barth presents a more fully developed theory of symbol, but Guite's reading complements and extends Barth's work. All of this is a valuable and welcome corrective to approaches that overly secularize the

[2] Molly Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1974).
[3] Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

early Coleridge and separate the poetry from the later theory and theology. [4]

While Guite's biographical story is compelling, there are moments when the critical analysis feels underdeveloped. It is an oversight, for example, not to consider the possibility of irony in the poem and the interpretive challenges of the 1817 marginal gloss. Guite assumes far too readily that the gloss improves the poem and represents Coleridge's own interpretation. The gloss introduces a new character and creates a different poem, and the interpretive questions raised by generations of critics merit discussion.[5] Similarly, not enough attention is given to the premodern ballad form of the poem, whose tale of gothic horror resists the redemptive resolution embraced by Guite and suggested by the marginal gloss. The textual and interpretive dynamics of the poem are more complex than Guite recognizes, and as a result, his book misses some of Coleridge's theological and intellectual depth. This could be corrected with more attention to Coleridge's German influences, including biblical criticism and hermeneutics, such as in E. S. Shaffer's *"Kubla Khan" and the Fall of Jerusalem* (1975).[6]

Guite's argument would also benefit from a more precise engagement with Coleridge's theories of symbol and language. Guite uses *symbol* and *emblem* interchangeably, and when discussing language, Guite uses *symbol* when the term *sign* would often be more appropriate. To be somewhat technical, language relies on signs to signify other meanings, and with language these signs are arbitrary, artificial, and established through social convention. Emblems are material objects or icons that have become signs, and nature itself is often seen as its own kind of language. However, it is debatable to what extent the language of nature is really natural or itself socially constructed and conventional because our human experience of meaning is always already saturated with language. Many of the Romantics, including Coleridge, sought to understand the complex relationships between these different contexts of meaning—conventional language, our experience of truth and beauty in nature, revelation and religious experience, and artistic creation—and Coleridge believed that all of these experiences of meaning are connected, and his later theory attempts to articulate this in terms of symbol, imagination, and logos. Guite sees connections in Coleridge's thought between nature, Scripture, and poetry—all connected via symbol and imagination—and he astutely traces these connections in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. All of this is good and helpful, but his critical argument would benefit from more careful engagement with the critical literature, including more discussion of the relationship between the language of nature and the language of words, including the

[4] J.Robert Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Fordham University Press, 2001).

[5] See, for example, Huntington Brown, "The Gloss to the Rime of the Ancient Mariner," *Modern Language Quarterly* 6 (1945): 319– 24; Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); and Jerome McGann, "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 35–67.

[6] E. S. Shaffer, *"Kubla Khan" and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

interpretive and imaginative processes whereby natural and conventional signs and emblems become symbols.[7]

More problematic is *Mariner*'s complete evasion of allegory. Without explanation, when Guite engages Coleridge's distinction between symbol and allegory in *The Statesman's Manual* (1816), a distinction informed by Goethe, Schelling, and others, Guite replaces *allegory* with *analogy* (pp. 259–60). This is unfortunate because *analogy* itself is not clearly defined, nor is there any recognition of the creative and theological power of the analogical imagination. Understandably, symbol's relationship to allegory is complicated, and Guite's *Mariner* is already a lengthy book. Presumably for clarity, Guite differentiates living symbols that participate in their deeper meanings from abstract artificial analogies or what Paul Ricoeur might call dead metaphors. Here Guite connects the distinction to Coleridge's concern with modernity's increasingly instrumental view of nature and the post-Enlightenment flattening of nature, reason, and language. All of this is helpful; however, these concerns are not unique to Coleridge. There is a larger intellectual context for these ideas that Guite mostly ignores, and the Romantic distinction fails to recognize symbol's historical dependence on the rich world of ancient allegory. One should not fault Guite too much for this, given that the confusion stems from the Romantic distinction itself, but the immediate context of Coleridge's distinction in *The Statesman's Manual* is biblical interpretation, in this case the historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible, which become symbols through their ability to speak in new ways to new audiences throughout history. James Engell has recognized this as allegory, noting that Coleridge's distinction between *symbol* and *allegory* is remarkably similar to Robert Lowth's distinction between *mystical allegory* and *allegory* in his eighteenth-century Oxford lectures on the Hebrew Bible as poetry.[8] Again, Guite's biographical narrative is compelling, but his critical argument would be stronger if he at least engaged allegory's complex relationship to symbol.

Guite's evasion of allegory is striking because his entire methodology is to read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a prophetic allegory for Coleridge's own subsequent journey. His method is not necessarily a problem, for the result is a powerful narrative journey in its own right that conveys new insights and re-enlivens a two-hundred-year-old poem for new audiences. Where Guite excels as a biographer, however, he falls short somewhat as a critic and historian, for few poems have evoked more allegorical interpretations than *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, raising the question of how this poem fits Coleridge's theoretical preference for symbol. I would like to propose that the poem demonstrates its symbolic nature through its enduring power to draw

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[7] The literature is vast, but a good start is Barth (2001); James C. McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Mary Anne Perkins, *Coleridge's Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[8] For Lowth's influence on Romanticism, see Stephen Prickett, *Words and the Word* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), and James Engell, *The Committed Word: Literature and Public Values* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). For symbol's complex relationship to allegory and hermeneutics, see Joel Harter, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Faith* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

readers into its own interpretive drama. Here it is helpful to remember symbol's connection (via the Platonic tradition) to the allegorical interpretation of ancient sacred texts.[9] Allegory first appeared historically, not as its own genre dependent on abstract personification or metaphor, but as a way of spiritually reimagining first Homer and later the Bible through interpretive vision. And that is precisely what Guite proposes for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The poem has its own rich story and context, while also opening up a deeper understanding of the human condition and Coleridge's own creative and existential struggles.

Guite's allegory does not work entirely. Theologically, the most obvious problem is that the mariner does not achieve redemption but an agonizing "penance of life" that requires the ongoing manic retelling of the story. There never really is any peace or homecoming for the mariner. This works within the gothic ballad form of the poem, but it feels considerably less resolved than Christian redemption, and it is not what Coleridge himself eventually experienced as the Sage of Highgate. That said, there are powerfully evocative correspondences between the poem and Coleridge's own journey and the dark night of the soul that Guite skillfully illuminates, and even the redeemed Christian remains a pilgrim and exile in this life anticipating a future homecoming. Guite's epilogue acknowledges the poem's irresolution by directing its ethical prophetic challenge to us and identifying, in particular, our current global ecological crisis. Coleridge now becomes the sadder and wiser wedding guest, and we ourselves something of the mariner, challenged to confront our own alienation and desperate need for renewed vision and imagination.

Allegories, like living metaphors, work best when they are not perfect and when their rough edges spark our imagination into ongoing interpretive work. Guite's narrative is not finally as resolved as his redemptive allegory suggests, but I proffer that there is deeper theological insight in the poem's resistance to resolution. The sadder wisdom of the poem is that we continue individually and collectively to experience alienation from nature, spirit, and one another. Every generation experiences its own challenges and alienation, and prophets and poets invite us to reconnect, but this is an ever-ongoing challenge. Coleridge himself speaks in *The Statesman's Manual* (1816) of the symbols in the Bible awakening the soul as if from exile to hear anew its own native language. Symbols have the power to awaken us to our authentic need and potential for connection and meaning, but we need continually to be re-awakened and re-connected, and learning this, we become both sadder and wiser. Guite is astute to connect our contemporary alienation to the current environmental crisis. Our alienation threatens quite literally to destroy us, and we continue to destroy and dehumanize one another with new forms of slavery, trafficking, and addiction. There is therefore a warning in Coleridge's poem and in his life—a cautionary tale—that we ignore at our peril.

[9] See Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).