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views

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Exhibition in the Folio Society Gallery

British Library, 6 December 2010 — 27 February 2011

THIS CAREFULLY CHOSEN EXHIBITION of books and manuscripts from the British Library's collection marked the publication of the ambitious new Folio Society illustrated edition of Coleridge's most celebrated poems. Both the exhibition and the new book throw up related questions concerning the display and visual communication of a writer and his work, issues which are being addressed in the major renovation of Coleridge Cottage, due to re-open this summer. These issues include whether or not the display of a printed volume, however rare, in a labelled glass case is sufficient in itself, whether visual images necessarily assist interpretation and whether a display of manuscripts and autographs are of compelling enough interest for either the general public or the active scholar. The former can only stare through the glass with various degrees of incomprehension, while the latter needs to handle the items if they are to spring to life. Interestingly, the exhibition's press release promised sound recordings. These were not forthcoming, although they featured prominently in the much larger, but not entirely successful exhibition, *Evolving English*, which ran concurrently with the one on Coleridge and which seemed to fall over itself to create a sense of visitor participation.

My own view is that the much more modest and sober Coleridge exhibition was more successful than *Evolving English*. It used a narrative frieze along a wall beside the display cases with simple text, featuring greatly enlarged images of Harry Brockway's powerful new *Ancient Mariner* illustrations along with those of earlier artists. The exhibition was divided into four sections based around Coleridge's life, each of which featured a carefully selected display of relevant books and manuscripts. Unfortunately, there was no catalogue, although I later obtained a list of the items on display from the British Library. However, no one with any interest in Coleridge could fail to have been deeply stirred by seeing his entire life and work set out in half a dozen display cases, including such fabled rarities as a copy of the Bristol impression of *Lyrical Ballads*, of which only six copies are known. The exhibition also included various autograph letters, poems and featured numerous Coleridge annotations to printed books.

One of the highlights of the first section, Early Life and Marriage, was Boyer's *Liber Aureus*, the Golden Book, which the Headmaster of Christ's Hospital maintained for elite pupils to write in and in which Coleridge's boyish hand is already recognisably his own. The Gutch Memorandum notebook was there also, as was his *Monody on the Death of Chatterton*, printed in its first edition as part of Sharpe's 1794 edition of Rowley's poems.

The Somerset Years section featured Buckler's evocative 1836 sketch of the Market Cross at Nether Stowey as well as Coleridge's characteristically

anguished annotation directed to the printer of a proof copy of his 1796 *Poems on Various Subjects*, 'The motto...where is the motto?' He is referring here to a missing epigraph from Aeschylus which obviously meant much to him, although the volume finally appeared with one from Statius instead. Aeschylus is used, however, as an epigraph to *Ode to the Departing Year*. Was it the same one? This is the kind of conundrum which is raised tantalisingly in an exhibition but which can only be sorted out in the library, for example, by reference to p. 48 of T J Wise's bibliography of Coleridge. Incidentally, the extent to which the *Fears in Solitude* Quarto is strikingly the most elegant and luxurious in printing and size of any published work by Coleridge was made especially clear when one sees it along side the other books. The 1816 *Christabel* volume is especially insignificant and drab looking, in striking contrast with its exotic contents.

The complex circumstances surrounding the printing of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798 benefited greatly from a visual display of the various stages of its original publication. At the beginning of the exhibition was Southey's copy of the Bristol impression of the first edition, of which only six copies are known. Then followed a manuscript version of *Lewti* as *The Circassian Love-Chant*, the poem which had to be removed from the 1798 volume in order to protect its anonymity. Finally, there was a copy of the London edition, opened at *The Nightingale*, the poem inserted in place of *Lewti*. Also on display was the 1806 manuscript addition to the *Mariner* taken from Notebook 11. (CN 2880) It starts, 'With never a whisper on the main/Off shot the spectre ship...' and, according to Coburn, this substantial addition reflects Coleridge's experience of his Malta sea-voyages. This section focusing on the *Ancient Mariner* was worth the visit in itself, even if it had not been for an elegantly hand-decorated title page of a manuscript copy of *The Prelude* presented to Coleridge by Wordsworth taken from Notebook 25. The section was completed by examples of modern illustrated editions of the poem, including those by David Jones, Edward A. Wilson and the most recent one by Harry Brockway, reviewed below.

The final section featured Coleridge's notebook sketch of his celebrated ascent of Scafell, but the main interest was perhaps the opportunity to see the extent and detail of his autograph notes to his own later works such as *Aids to Reflection*. Also on display was his heavily annotated copy of Ayscough's 1807 edition of Shakespeare, which formed the basis of his 1811 lecture series on Shakespeare and Milton at The Crown and Anchor. The pages were encrusted with Coleridge's handwriting.

There is no denying that this exhibition must have seemed rather low-key to a casual visitor to the British Library, although the labelling and text of the frieze were very effective in linking the displayed items into a coherent narrative. However, for the true believer, there will always be a special fascination in seeing, for example, Southey's copy of the Bristol edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. And, for anyone with a serious interest in Coleridge as a writer,

this exhibition was a unique opportunity to examine at leisure many wonderful treasures set out side-by-side. The picture which lingers above all is of a writer, whose numerous annotations to his own and others' volumes suggest that for



Frontispiece to *The Ancient Mariner and three other poems*
(Folio Society 2010; illustrated by Harry Brockway.)

him a book was never a conclusion to a line of thought or a monument to the past, but rather a work continually in progress, truly 'a machine to think with', in IA Richards's reformulation of Le Corbusier. I, for one, am extremely glad not to have missed this exhibition.