

We Shot the Albatross: Jeffrey Barbeau interviews Philip Hoare

MORE THAN 200 YEARS AFTER ITS PUBLICATION in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” remains one of Coleridge’s most celebrated poems. The work has inspired countless dramatizations, imitations, and presentations in visual arts, music, and, most recently, a website devoted to a new interpretation of the work for our times: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner Big Read*.¹ The project, following in the footsteps of award-winning author Philip Hoare’s production of *Moby-Dick Big Read*, assembles a star-studded cast of readers to recount the Mariner’s calamitous voyage. Jeffrey Barbeau, associate editor of *The Coleridge Bulletin*, sat down for a video conversation with Philip Hoare, co-creator of the stimulating new project, in May 2020 to ask him more about the origins of the *Ancient Mariner Big Read*, the process by which it was created, and the meaning of Coleridge’s poem today.

JB: Thank you for sitting down to speak with *The Coleridge Bulletin* about the Ancient Mariner Big Read. You are best known for your writing on whales, especially *Leviathan or, The Whale* (2008), which won the BBC Samuel Johnson prize for nonfiction.² What began your interest in whales and the sea?

PH: I was born and raised in Southampton in the UK, still living in the house where I was brought up, and about a mile away from sea and the docks. The docks are very familiar territory for me. A very apprehensive and scary territory for me growing up. The sea was very trepidatious for me as a boy. I never learned to swim until I was about 30 years old, even though I was brought up next to the sea. So, I had a very equivocal relationship with the sea, which I only reconciled in my late 20s, early 30s when I was in London, by which time I had a career in music—in punk actually, managing bands and so forth.

Eventually that period of my life ended. I was feeling very claustrophobic. After spending years in night clubs, I realized I had turned my back on the place I had come from. So, I taught myself to swim alongside the help of an elderly woman at a local Edwardian swimming pool, and I became a new convert to the sea. This led at the same time to my rediscovering my love for whales from childhood. When I was growing up in the 1970s, Greenpeace was active, and I was politicized from an early age in a way. At the same time, I started going to the East Coast of the United States, specifically to Provincetown in Cape Cod. My friend John Waters, the film director, who had reviewed my first book for *The New York Times Book Review*—he’s my punk-literary godfather really—John lives there during the summer, and

¹ <<https://www.ancientmarinerbigread.com/>>

² *Leviathan* was republished in the U.S. as *The Whale: In Search of the Giants of the Sea* (2010). This interview transcript has been edited for clarity, length, and content.

hanging out there led me to connect to whales in the wild and the sea. It was a Damascene conversion of sorts, being open to the water. Provincetown still has the vestiges of the past—it was the fourth biggest whaling town in the States. It's close by to Nantucket and New Bedford and all that heritage. I started reading Melville. I wasn't reading actually *Moby-Dick*, but *Billy Budd*. As I started to read the literature associated with that region, almost through the back door I started to get into Melville. I was in Melville territory and just keyed into what was going on there. John says I became a "whale stalker" (*laughs*). So, I began to write about whales and Melville in a non-scientific way. I've been on that journey ever since.

After that came the Moby-Dick Big Read with the Arts Institute of the University of Plymouth. That project started in 2011. It took two years to make. I was Artist in Residence at the Marine Institute at the University of Plymouth. We were going after the model of the Moby-Dick Marathon at New Bedford, where it's read over 36 hours. I actually had the opportunity to read for that event—they asked me to read chapter one, which was quite an honor—and so Angela Cockayne from Bath Spa University, who is the artist I've worked with on these two projects, and I started working on that together, with the Art Institute's director, Sarah Chapman. We discovered that people respond to *Moby-Dick* in so many different ways. The White Whale is much like the Albatross: a freighted image. We were very keen to explore the cultural reverberations of *Moby-Dick* in this region of Somerset and to have it spoken aloud with a great gallery of people from John Waters, Benedict Cumberbatch, the Prime Minister David Cameron, and Mary Oliver. It turned out to be very successful, especially in the States, where it is used as a teaching aid.

Later came a proposal to do another one, especially since *Moby-Dick* had been so incredibly popular. We had 10 million hits on the project—it was incredibly popular. So, we tried to think of what we could do. We thought about *Robinson Crusoe*, but that didn't really seem to work. The joy of *Moby-Dick* is that each chapter is a discrete story. You don't have to read the whole book to know what's going on. So we needed something like that, and I thought of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" partly because it was such an influence on Melville, partly because of its influence on Mary Shelley, and really it took us awhile to really convince ourselves that it would work because it's a much shorter work of literature even though it is still rather long with about 150 verses.

JB: There is a real difference between the two though, isn't there? What was that like for you to work on such different projects, with *Moby-Dick* a rather expansive one compared to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which is comparably concise?

PH: *Moby-Dick* was such a crazy, sprawling thing to do—getting 136 people to read this book, and some of the chapters are very long even if others are

rather short. We didn't really know what we were doing. It had its own dynamic and its own culture in a way. A lot had to do with the artists who were responding. We were soliciting images from contemporary artists, and it was very interesting to see how many female artists were responding to what is often viewed as a very boyish book, certainly as it is perceived in Britain.

With the Rime, we wanted to keep tighter artistic control on the project. We weren't in a position of needing so many people to complete it, as with *Moby-Dick*. With the Rime, the imagery of the poem is so intense. Each reading is less than a minute long. There's so much power in there. Plus, with the poem, we can run the text alongside the reading and the image. So, there's good ways of giving it context and there's rich textual material, too, which gives various artistic, scientific, and literary responses.

JB: Tell us more about the process. What do the actual mechanics of recording look like when you meet a reader in a given location?

PH: Since we were asking a big favor of people, it always had to be on their terms. Some people we did it remotely with, too. Iggy Pop, for example, did it from his iPhone from his house in Miami.

JB: He gives such a great reading!

PH: It is good isn't it! He is such a consummate artist that it was never not going to be good. I must admit I felt really ashamed that actually I gave him notes suggesting how to read it. I thought, "My God, I'm telling Iggy Pop how to do something!" He's such a huge hero of mine.

Some people like Marianne Faithfull we went to record with two key people in the project: director Adam Low and producer Martin Rosenbaum, with whom I made a feature-length film, *The Hunt for Moby-Dick*, for the BBC. They are so accomplished, and a professional team like that is key, since I'm not a professional sound technician. People we were aiming at were those with a backstory. Marianne Faithfull, for example, revered the poem, knowing it since she was in a convent school. It felt wicked and blasphemous in some ways to her.

JB: Yes, I remember that from the commentary on Reading no. 14. Marianne Faithfull describes the Rime as a "true horror poem" and how she first heard it at 14 years of age, "in my English class at St. Joseph's convent school." Her English teacher read it, and Faithfull says, "She obviously believed Coleridge was a very important poet and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' a very important poem, and all the nuns in the world weren't going to stop her." It's such a humorous story. I wonder, do you remember when you first read "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"? What was your earliest impression of Coleridge, and how did this project begin to help you think differently about the poem?

PH: Yeah! It's great, isn't it? As for me, it's so embedded in English culture that I would have heard it from way back. And the lines are so famous, "Water, water, everywhere ..." I had been writing a lot about Melville and I saw his metaphysical strangeness—the strangeness of his take on all things to do with literature and the sea—so I was going into the poem in a Melvillian way already. Also, my most recent book, which I had just published before starting the Rime project, dealt a lot with the Romantic incarnation of the sea through Byron and Shelley, though not so much Coleridge, and also *The Tempest* was a starting place for my book and then through the Romantics.

Of course, my residence here in Southampton is a part of this, too. I swim in the storied waterway here every day. I found a great letter from Keats where he comes to the sea at Southampton. The tide is out, almost like the sea doesn't exist, but he puts *The Tempest* in his pocket and says, "There's my comfort." That's the heritage of Southampton, with its Roman and medieval port. That's what I see in Coleridge's use of deliberate archaisms and I hear the influence of *The Tempest* on the Rime, too. It's changing images of the sea through Renaissance influences, turning to the sublime, and then moving into a modernistic sea. In my mind, I was going from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, to Coleridge, to Mary Shelley, to Edgar Allan Poe, to *Moby-Dick*, and then on to Virginia Woolf, W. H. Auden, Eliot, and the ways that the sea appears in a Modernist idiom. These seem so connected, like pulse-points. You have Prospero/Shakespeare, the Mariner/Coleridge (with Wordsworth with him obviously), Victor Frankenstein's Creature/Mary Shelley, Arthur Gordon Pym/Edgar Allan Poe, and of course Ishmael/Melville. Then we go onwards to Virginia Woolf. She was obsessed with *Moby-Dick*. She had read it three times and wrote in one of her letters that no one in the future will believe that my work has always been inspired by the sight of a distant fin "passing far out."

All these things link up and become almost like a science fiction meme in a way. Present-actual, supernatural, and to me something quite cryptic. These are very popular works: *The Tempest*, *The Rime*, *Moby-Dick*. These are populist works. Lots of people would say that they know these stories well, whereas they are actually incredibly complicated and multi-layered works.

JB: One of the ways you bring out the layers is through the addition of accompanying sounds—waves and bells and different resonances—that enhance the text and shape meaning. Your own context and thinking about the sea is surely an influence on your work. Of course, the poem itself is one with a very distinctive set of sound patterns, and many critics have specifically "listened" to the poem for a sense of how sound creates meaning. But the Big Read version enhances and arguably even alters the sound patterns through the additional layers you've created.

PH: Yes! That's a very important part of the project and such a good

observation. Thank you. We hoped that was the case and worked throughout with a sound artist named Jay Auburn. He's a composer in his own right, though a young chap, and pretty much all the sounds were recorded *for* the project. So from the Antarctic, for example, I had my friend Peter Wilson who is a polar guide down there helping.

JB: I loved the video of him in Reading no. 4! It brings out the ice and snow and cracking with the seals and penguins in the background. It really brings the text alive.

PH: The University has an old wooden schooner. We went out to the sea and recorded the sound. The wave patterns you see on the footage were filmed patterns. They look like they were computer generated but they were actually originally filmed. The bells were recorded, some in Ottery St. Mary where Coleridge was baptized. Wherever we were going we were doing wild tracks. At Cambridge, we recorded Robert Macfarlane [*no. 11*] and Ali Smith [*no. 12*] and we went for a swim in the river beforehand, recording wild tracks.

It's a great mosaic of sound, which comes to fruition at the end. The last reading goes up on the 27 of May, and the next day on the 28th the whole thing will be down there together as a mosaic and the soundscape is going to be much enhanced as well. It will be composed as well, so there will be movements in different sections of the poem that will come together as one.

JB: That brings up an interesting line of inquiry. Some listeners would prefer a single reader the whole way through the whole poem—Ian McKellen's reading comes to mind—but you have explored multiple voices. You did this already in the *Moby-Dick Big Read*. What do you think the use of multiple voices adds to the poem that a single reader doesn't allow for?

PH: I think it keeps you on your toes. We live in an age of short attention spans. I think of these as broadcasts. They are more like tweets. It's anathema to an old school Coleridgean, I'm sure. In fact, Marianne Faithfull said to me, "You're ruining the poem! How dare you do that!" I said "Well, yeah, I know we are in one way, but we're trying to make it open to people."

The other thing we felt is that you really got to know the text. You saw the poem and heard the poem and, in that old school way, maybe start to *learn* the poem. That was the feeling.

There are so many different voices in the poem anyway. Lots of different voices. Different points of view that those represent and where you are at different points. And the way that you forget things—it's not all at sea, for instance, and the albatross isn't in quite a lot of the poem. You kind of remember things that are strange and beautiful. It's Wordsworthian in a way, isn't it?

JB: It certainly does create "spots of time" in its own way. I found the project

forced me to slow down. The use of the commentary and the different readers. It encouraged me to look at each section differently because of that slowing down process. And there's not only the readers and commentators but also images and film. The artwork that accompanies each reading seems to me an important aspect of what is happening. I'm thinking about Abigail Lane's *Forever Always Somewhere* [no. 16] is almost comical with the scattering of bouncing bones or the squalid degradation of Chris Jordan's *Albatross* [no. 25] footage. What guided the process of selecting these works and matching them to the various readings?

PH: The Abigail Lane appealed to me because it reminded me of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I see that as a very Coleridgean movie really. And I think the art was a way of bringing out the science fiction or time-travelling aspect of the poem as great art really. It was great to be able to do that, calling up great contemporary artists such as Marina Abramović, William Kentridge, Cornelia Parker, and Glenn Brown. If you go to them and start talking about the Rime, you don't have to say more. It's such a painterly composition. They just came up with great stuff. A lot of them let us use images that were already done, but some created images that were especially made for us. Charles Avery [no. 18] did a whole series of watercolors on the Ancient Mariner that are worth checking out. It's really interesting. Ellen Gallagher [no. 19], a black American artist, her work is very evocative of the themes. She's even made an additional piece for a physical exhibition of art by some of the artists that is touring around the U.K. She made a piece for that, a cyanotype, a hanging called "Ah Wretch."

Of course, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is so heavily depicted in art history: Gustave Doré, Mervyn Peake, and David Jones—the Welsh artist working from the mid-1920s through the 1940s, who made these amazing images of the Rime. We didn't want to use older images.

JB: These are very contemporary works. All this talk of art and imagination has me thinking. Much has been made of the moral in the final stanzas of the poem: "He prayeth best who loveth best" and so forth. Critics have found that for a work of "pure imagination," as Coleridge described the poem, these lines are somewhat simplistic or trivial. But you describe it as having a sort of obscurity or mystery about it. How do you interpret the ending?

PH: You'll see when you come to the end with the people we have reading it. The poem becomes so sentimental and sort of homey. It's odd really. But then I wonder, if it was partly inspired by John Newton's *Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750–1754*, I wonder if there's a little bit of something in this. Of course, John Newton went on to write *Amazing Grace*, too. Both use the word "wretch" and I really like that word. It means such different things: the wretch, in Coleridge, it's this "woah" [*groaning*] ... but the "wretch" in *Amazing Grace*, it becomes just "wretch" [*dryly*]. It's just the next step to

heaven really. So, it's quite interesting to consider this in light of Coleridge's Christianity. Both he and Newton both were abolitionists, too.

JB: There's a deep sense of depravity that Coleridge seems to be exploring in the poem. Coleridge felt that autobiographically, too. This weight of depression on him. A need for something more. We see that in the poem, which is perhaps why he's so often compared to the Mariner even though it is a poem he wrote quite early in life.

PH: It's almost like a positive-Melville, which becomes almost symbolist, like [Charles] Baudelaire or even [Arthur] Rimbaud in Melville's time. We read Coleridge's opium addiction in a very different way now because of our understanding of drug addiction. Yet there is a sense of his own *outsiderness* through his addiction. Thomas De Quincey describes this as "circles in the air" of sorts. Coleridge was, like Melville, an unfulfilled genius in a way. A guy who frittered away his talents from what I can see of his biography.

JB: I'd like to know more about your decision to perform a reading, no. 22. I'd like to play it for you and talk more about it. [*plays reading*] There's so much happening in this episode. I wonder: Why this passage? Why the image by Nicola Bealing? And is that the sound of whales in the background? Please tell us more.

PH: It is a whale. I recorded it three or four years ago when I was off the coast of Mexico. It's kind of a joke because anyone who knows me knows my passion for whales. Plus, they became the "sweet sounds." There's this notion that the whalers who first heard humpbacks singing would hear them through the hull of the ship. This was thought to be the souls of drowned sailors.

The reading was recorded on the shore of Southampton where I swim. I just like the selection. The part about "The body of my brother's son" and the almost-PTSD suffering of the Mariner in the way he is communicating this. It's a very vivid passage with a lot of physicality about it for me.

Actually, I didn't want to do it. I was pressured to do it by my team. I had someone else lined up entirely, and they said "No, we want you to do it."

JB: I'm glad they did. As we start to wrap up, I should note that the Ancient Mariner Big Read appears online amidst a global pandemic, which later listeners may not realize in the coming years. What does this poem have to say to us right now in this time of heightened awareness of environmental concerns, disease, and the Age of the Anthropocene?

PH: We first formulated the idea about five years ago and have been working on it full pelt, as it were, for the past three years. So, it's always been for us closely connected to concerns about the environment. Of course, the Rime

pretty much coincides with one of the first datings of the Anthropocene. The sense of loneliness and isolation, which we were thinking about because obviously that's one of the abiding fears and also energies of the poem. The university actually suggested that we should perhaps postpone the broadcast until after the current *thing* is over. But I insisted that obviously this speaks to a lot of fears but also joys.

I don't know what it's like in the U.S. but here, culturally, people are really turning to poetry. The news broadcasts end with poems that are read by people like Ian McKellen. Of course, it's Wordsworth's anniversary this year, so there's been a lot about that. So, poetry has really come to the fore as a kind of solace. It's something hard, something encapsulated and intense. It's really remarkable how poetry is part of the cultural reaction to what's going on. There's a great emptiness that had to be filled, and it's interesting how it has been filled, in a popular way as well, by what might be seen as the most rarified literary form. For all those reasons, it seems like a good time to do it. This isn't meant to be cynical at all, if it sounds that way. We're releasing a work of art, which people are very thirsty for at the moment. They can't experience it in a gallery or concert halls or theatres. So, we were very conscious that we're giving them something—something that's free, as well—right now.

JB: And there's a larger message here about the arts in public life, isn't there? So often we think of science as something that stands separate from the humanities, and yet a project like this draws readers and listeners into a deeper interconnection between disciplines that are often divided. The Ancient Mariner Big Read project encourages people to think about the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities in a capturing of the whole. It is really quite Coleridgean and, in that sense, quite a gift to individual readers and the public.

PH: That's exactly what Angela and I think about it, and the way we have thought about it all along. Angela and I have both worked with marine scientists and various people across disciplines. John Spicer, who is one of the scientific consultants on the project, he knows the poem by heart. His reading was recorded in Coleridge Cottage in Nether Stowey. So that's absolutely what we wanted. Without sounding pompous, we really do see this as a gift to people. We've spent three years on it. We've not been paid for it. It's just a labor of love. It's been really hard work, and trying to persuade people to read it, not all of whom know what we're talking about. But you say those lines, and they're there! Coleridge would have seen no differences between the natural philosophies and the sciences and the arts—that disastrous schism is responsible for why we're in this mess.