

# Faith, Coleridge, and Poetry: An Interview with English poet Malcolm Guite

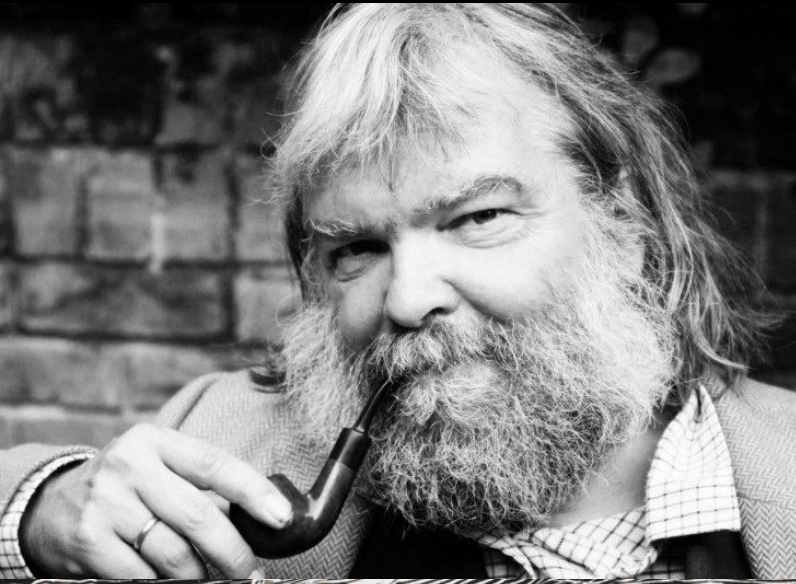


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The poet-priest [Malcolm Guite](#) is difficult to define in such a short space. Guite is an immensely gifted poet, Anglican priest, and singer-songwriter in the rock band "Mystery Train." In the Anglican Communion, he is known and celebrated for his work [Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year](#). Guite was gracious enough to meet with me for a Zoom interview over the holidays, tuning into my Winnipeg office from his home in Cambridge, England. In the interview, Guite discusses how poetry shaped his faith, and why Samuel Taylor Coleridge should be understood as a profoundly Christian poet.

**Sara Krahn:** I imagine you've been asked this question many times over the course of your life, but I like to think that even the most generic questions take on new life in front of a new audience, so I'd like to ask: What was your religious or spiritual upbringing, and can you describe the moment you knew you were called to live a life of faith?

**Malcolm Guite:** I was fortunate to be born into a Christian household. My father was a Methodist local preacher who was quite articulate and was a man of extraordinary integrity. My mother was a Scots and came from a Presbyterian background. She is where the poetry comes from. One of her deepest influences was George McDonald who she'd read as a child. I went to Sunday School as a kid, and faith came very naturally to me; I had a strong sense of the living presence of God when I was a young child. But as a teenager, and like many teenagers I suppose, I abandoned my faith. I had a bit of a crisis in my mid-teens. At the time I was in a boarding school in England, and I was miserable and homesick and going through the first rounds of adolescent angst. I'd become convinced that this faith I'd been brought up with wasn't real anymore and I tried to do the opposite thing. I tried a very rigid scientific reductive materialism. This was, of course, in the days before Richard Dawkins, but the person who had the most reductive view was B.F. Skinner who was a behaviourist. Now,

my father was a classicist, a very educated and widely read man, he subscribed, for example, to the *Scientific American*. Yet I'd become quite convinced that in the end we're just unwinding enzymes and selfish genes, and this is a series of unplanned chemical reactions, and this is a kind of terrible irony. And this illusion of mind and personhood full of completely unsatisfiable longings—this is like a bad joke. This is absurd. At the same time, I was reading the French philosophers and should apologize, I was 16 at this point and clearly a precocious teenager—I was reading Sartre under the bed clothes! I thought of myself as both a materialist and existentialist. But I now realize that there was a deeper motivation to my attitude. I was actually haunted by God—the God I was turning my back on. And my response was to try and embrace a world view in which God didn't exist. And the worldview I tried to embrace was in fact completely deadening. So, I tried this. But I still had a poet's soul—I grew up with poetry and my mother reading me poetry before bed. I had read the Narnia books, so I was trying to clamp down on the entire imaginative side of my life to keep God out of view. But I had an epiphany. My parents took me to the house of John Keats while we were on holiday, and in Keats's house I read on the wall I read "Ode to a Nightingale." Now, you must imagine me as this bleak, lonely, and in many respects repressed adolescent. ["Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!"](#)

I read this poem and I was just transfixed by the richness of it. It's obviously a very sensual poem: the movement from the dull ache to this very ecstatic thing. And then the image at the back of the poem of these "magic encasements" opening on "perilous seas." It was as if suddenly all this repressed sense of mystery and transcendence just opened, and I was almost shaking. I read the poem again and again, and suddenly had this firm conviction that whatever else was happening to me in this room was not a chemical reaction alone, it was not just a bunch of enzymes. That even if someone could do a brain scan of me at that moment and could work out the exact pattern

of atoms moving in my brain and process the neuropathways, you would not have come to the end of it. You would no more understand what the experience of the poem was than you would understand a Mozart symphony if you watched the lines on an oscilloscope bouncing up and down but couldn't hear it. I was just completely aware of this transcendent dimension delivered entirely to me through this poem from a young man who died at the age of 26. I suddenly realized that I couldn't have a reductive account in the face of this mystery.

**SK:** So, John Keats opened these "magic encasements" for you, and this is where poetry found you in your life? With Keats?

**MG:** Yes! I had this completely transcendent experience and thought Keats was the source, so I went on to completely absorb the poetry of Keats. I wanted to be a poet because of Keats. Basically, I spent years doing the equivalent of "air guitar" to Keats, writing these very slushy sub-Keatsian lines; but I learnt a huge amount. I ended up switching my studies from Science to English, and I won a scholarship to read literature at Cambridge. By this time, I was no longer an atheist, but definitely not a believer. It was transcendent aesthetic experience through the arts that was feeding my soul. Poetry literally opened the magic encasements for me; but in the end, it was not sufficient for me to have a series of aesthetic thrills and a spirituality of individual transcendent experience which makes no demands on you or changes your relationship to your neighbour. I began to realize there's a danger in transcendence becoming the fix, that I was somehow having my cake and eating it too. I began to feel that if there was transcendence there was also a source of transcendence. At the time, I was specializing in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature, and this involved also reading Christian Theology. So, I began to read theology, beginning with Augustine's *Confessions*, which completely blew my mind. Augustine was a greater mind than I would ever be, and I began to think that there was something in this. Around this same

time, I was reading the book of Psalms, and while I was reading the Psalms I had a moment of complete transcendence, which was something different from the Keats moment. I was reading a Psalm aloud, when I suddenly realized that the one to which this poem was addressed was present in the room. But I had been reading as though he weren't present in the room. It was as though at one moment I was in my room at the centre, and then I suddenly felt that I wasn't in the centre at all, but what was in the centre was this holy presence. I was in that place where I felt God as utterly holy and present, that in fact I am not a thinker but a thought, and my existence is entirely dependent on the gaze of this one on whom I have turned my back. I went back to Cambridge feeling kind of haunted, and I went to the chaplain with my grievance. The chaplain said, "well you recited the Psalms blasphemously, as though God were not there. And he came when you called, but you weren't calling him." Somehow amid this experience and another one that closely followed, the penny dropped, and I realized I believed it: The one on whom we depend on chooses to be dependant and weak before us. And for the first time in my life, I felt it was okay to be human. Because God comes to us as a human. Not long after this experience I went on to become confirmed in the Anglican Church.

**SK:** I want to ask you about [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#). Coleridge is a poet who figures largely in your life and work. You have written on his poetic imagination in an essay in your book [Faith, Hope and Poetry](#) and then much more substantially on his vision in your 2017 book [Mariner: A Theological Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#) which you take readers on a theological voyage of Coleridge's epic ballad. You've even written a sonnet about Coleridge! Why is Coleridge such an important poet for you?

**MG:** I was studying Coleridge a bit at university. Like me, he was born into a Christian household. And like me, he left it for a bit and then came back to it. In his poem ["Frost at Midnight"](#) he writes:

**"And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
Of that eternal language, which thy God  
Utters, who for eternity doth teach  
Himself in all, and all things in himself."**

When he says the "lovely shapes and sounds" he's referring to the entire phenomena of nature. And he's switching metaphors from the mechanistic one that he inherited, and that I inherited too, to some extent, which is the mechanistic metaphor where everything is only a thing and accounted for by equal and opposite reactions and inevitable interactions of things and forces. But [Coleridge] realized this wasn't the only way to understand things. Maybe they're not just things but also words. A word is a thing and a quantifiable bit of sound, and I could write a poem and send it to you and if you didn't know it was a poem you could do a beautiful chemical analysis of the paper and letters and come up with volumes of completely true facts about it and never know it was a poem. And when I would tell you it was a poem, you'd be shocked, and suddenly all the other facts would still be true, but you would discover what they meant. So, when Coleridge says: "So shalt we hear the lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language which thy God / Utters," he means we must learn to read the world like a poem. Everything is what it is, but it is also more than what it is, it speaks of something else; it's resonant. We're living surrounded by living metaphors. Jesus is constantly using them in the parables.

**SK:** Coleridge's famous poem, [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#) isn't the most uplifting poem. It's ultimately about a crime committed for no real reason other than that it could be committed. The Mariner kills the albatross, that has been serving as the ship's guide through the northern seas. And in this killing, he unleashes a nightmare into his life. It's a story of an individual's cross to bear, but also an exploration of the fallenness and loneliness of the human experience. But the poem offers an



accessible darkness and speaks with a prophetic imagination. I've often wondered if the Mariner's story would've been as powerful if Coleridge had written it as a novel. Do you think the poetic form has the power to capture certain truths that might otherwise be lost in other forms of storytelling?

**MG:** That's a good question. I think the poetic form opens different things in our mind and allows our imagination to function in a different way. That has to do with the incantatory and musical effect of phrases—there is the word “chant” in enchantment. About it being grim, you're right. It doesn't back down from the awfulness of life, and some of the poem's phrases remain part of the common language: “Alone, alone, always alone of the wide wide sea.” But the point about the poem is that it's about a voyage back. It's about the return and being transformed. But, it's not a glib happy ending. It's not like “I was a bad boy and then I repented and now I'm totally happy and unscarred.” That's a trivializing view of humanity. Everything we do affects us and affects us for life, the question being how redeemable our actions are. One of the most important images in scripture is Christ's invitation to Thomas to touch his wounds. Christ's wounds are still there even in the resurrection, and they're glorified, but they're not undone. To me, the turning point in the poem is where the Mariner gets to the point of absolute loneliness, and he can't bear to look anywhere, and he closes his eyes and tries to pray and can't do that either. He's trying every dimension and they're all closed, and he's utterly alone. But then, suddenly we switch the focus from the Mariner in utter despair and agony on the deck, and we look up at the moon. The Mariner looks again at the scene in the moonlight and suddenly everything is transfigured. And he sees the very water snakes that he has just cursed, and he sees them as beauty:

**“O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart  
And I blessed them unaware.”**

And then here comes the turn theologically. He says:

**“The self-same moment I could pray  
And from my neck so free  
The albatross fell off and sank  
Like lead into the sea.”**

Now he didn't learn to pray by twisting himself into some theological contortion or doing exactly what his pastors and masters had told him to do. All he did was look at the world suddenly bathed in moonlight and rejoice in it. At this point in his recovery, literally metanoia, he's not thinking about himself at all. He's entirely invested in the independent life and beauty of the other creature. He's simply blessing it. And in fact, that is the exact ritual opposite to what he did to the albatross. Because he shot it. But the transformation does not happen in a church, it happens just outside it. The wedding guest is on his way to the church, and then he gets stopped by this embarrassing street person and they have this conversation in which he discovers the true meaning of everything that could possibly go on in a church: metanoia, transfiguration, the meaning of the cross. But at no point is it put in the lips of a church pastor. The mariner says: “He prayeth best who loveth best all things both great and small.” After I'd written the book, I discovered annotations Coleridge made in the Book of Common Prayer. His annotation for the service of communion is a note that says the best and only preparation for this is to read often and on your knees the prologue to John's Gospel: “In him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” And then receive this sacrament as the whole of creation coming to God in this sacrament. It just doesn't get more inclusive than that.