

Antonella Riem Natale *Coleridge and Hinduism: The Unstruck Sound*

Stefano Beggiora

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Review of Riem Natale, A. (2023). *Coleridge and Hinduism: The Unstruck Sound*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 383 pp.

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and her song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those cave of ice!
(Kubla Khan, ll. 42-54).

The time span from the second half of the eighteenth to the first half of the nineteenth century was a period of exaltation for British colonialism in India. In particular from the battle of Plassey (1757), during the Seven Years' War, which put an end to the claims of French expansionism in the Subcontinent, up to the decline and ruin of the Mutiny (1857), the East India Company managed to dominate the trade flow with Asia and to lay the foundations of the largest colonial empire in history. In this crucial historical moment the West (and especially England), despite the policies of exploitation in Asia, began to develop a romantic vision and a great fascination for Eastern culture in general, with special reference to India. Traces of this trend can be found as early as the late Middle Ages, through the exoticizing narratives of missionaries, pilgrims and crusaders who returned home



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-06-04
Accepted
Published 2023-08-29

Open access

© 2023 Beggiora | © 4.0



Citation Beggiora, S. (2023). Review of *Coleridge and Hinduism: The Unstruck Sound*, by Riem Natale, A. *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 59, 799-802.

through Syria, Byzantium, and the ports of southern Europe. But if it is true that the East inspired many western prose works in the nineteenth century, it was precisely at the end of the eighteenth century that elements of Indian culture, religion and spirituality extended to English poetry. This happened thanks to the Orientalist movement initiated in particular by William Jones, famous poet, jurist and linguist. In this magical atmosphere of the end of the century, India succeeded in gently imposing its existence and its cosmogonic and initiatory myths. If for some historians Orientalism was a means of mediation and a vehicle for good relations between Indians and Europeans, in a politically anything but idyllic context, it is also true that the first great attempt at mapping the sacred literature of the Subcontinent, through Sanskrit and its multiple vernacular languages, dates back to this same period.

On closer inspection, this bilateral relationship of cultural exploration between India and England has an osmotic nature: in fact even later, when in the imperial era the educational project based on the Western model of the 'anglicists' - often contemptuous towards the colony - took hold, the Bengali Renaissance developed by contrast as a self-affirmation movement. But this socio-religious reform, which greatly contributed to Indian independence, had previously undergone and incorporated the influence of the Orientalist period and in some way promoted an attempt to create a bridge between East and West.

The life and thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), English poet, literary critic and philosopher, took place in the period of the first flowering of this fervent process of cultural, spiritual and artistic exploration. Originating from Devon, he did not escape the fascination of Indian culture, in which he found renewed sources of creative figures and suggestions. The originality and immensity of this imagined space and the comparison with otherness sharpen the creativity of the poet, who can immerse himself here in a new repertoire, which evidently constituted the warp and weft of his readings. It is known that the very first contact Coleridge had with India dates back to his childhood, when he received letters from his brother John, officer in charge of the British army in Calcutta from 1771. This epistolary relationship with his older brother determined a sort of imprinting that he had towards Indian culture. And although he never had the opportunity to travel personally to the Subcontinent and his knowledge of it was limited to a substantially bookish education, many of the principles learned in this formative moment seem today to have dictated the guidelines of his existential research. It is safe to argue that from the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century there was a process of metabolization of the materials of Indian narrative. The first translations, the critical editions of ancient texts took a new path after their absorption in English

literature, through changes that culminated in the rise of a new literary dimension. But the salient aspects of religion, myths, sacred texts of the Indian tradition became part of English Romanticism and its poetry precisely because of Coleridge's poetic encounter with India.

Paradoxically, awareness of the relevance of the poet in this broader scenario has only recently been explored in academia. Furthermore, the scholars who have ventured into the definition of this interweaving of literary genres are few and for the most part poorly versed in Indological matters. The only exception in this investigation is Antonella Riem, full professor of English literature at the University of Udine, who with her *Coleridge and Hinduism: The Unstruck Sound* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023) reaps the fruits of more than twenty-five years of research on the subject. Earlier on, in fact, she had emphasized Coleridge's philosophical and spiritual itinerary in Hinduism through two important publications: *The One Life: Coleridge and Hinduism* (Rawat Publications, 2005) and *L'immaginazione poetica e l'induismo* (in Italian language; Forum, 2021). But it is precisely with *The Unstruck Sound* that Riem investigates this universe of poetic, philosophical and metaphysical connections in detail, through a careful textual analysis of both the major Coleridge poems and the works considered early and minor. Drawing on the most recent critical debate, analogies and precise references emerge here to most of the best known production of the English poet; but Riem also explores a lot of unpublished material with passionate dedication and scientific accuracy.

The leitmotif linking each act of Coleridge's thought and work is therefore the search for a sense of Oneness and Unity that the author of the book finds easily comparable to the Indian philosophy of *advaita* (non-dual doctrine). On the one hand, in fact, the poet tries to rediscover a sense of communion and consubstantiality of all things in life, problematizing and exploring every artistic, philosophical, scientific, metaphysical, psychological and spiritual aspect of this research. The role of poetry has therefore assumed this almost archetypal mission; as well as in India, the aesthetic canons of art (and therefore also of literature) perform a soteriological function. On the other hand, a good part of the history of Indian philosophy has been characterized by schools that have investigated, in a non-dual key, the consubstantiality of the Self (*ātman*) and the Absolute (*Brahman*). This idea of continuity, reciprocity, uniqueness in the phenomenology of Being is often expressed in Coleridge's favourite metaphors of the 'absence' of sound. Hence the connection with the concept of *anāhata*, which in Sanskrit refers to 'unstruck sound', or energy of transcendental consciousness which is found, differently theorized, in the texts of yoga, of tantrism, and/or often in relation to the cults of the Goddess (*Devī*). Sound is the reflective awareness of the energy of transcendental consciousness, becoming conscious of itself: indeed in yoga the *anāhata cakra* is the centre of the heart, where the

subtle vibration of the *anāhata nāda*, the ‘unemitted sound of life’, can be heard and felt. And this is closely related to that Oneness sought by mystics, philosophers and poets.

A clear knowledge of the notions of Vedānta therefore seems to clearly emerge in Coleridge: for example the word ‘bliss’ is used as the perfect English equivalent of the Sanskrit concept of *ānanda*, beatitude, absolute awareness of the fullness of one’s Being. And so on, also through the translation of the Bhagavad Gītā and other Indian doctrinal texts that were a source of nourishment for the poet’s imagination. It is almost a metamorphosis of the artist, who was born tethered by the rigidity of Western positivist, scientific and religious dogmatic ideas, but who manages to emancipate his human, emotional and participatory dimension, through the study of Indian traditions and texts, as a kind of metaphor of the encounter with otherness.

But this dynamics is not at all in contrast with the cardinal principle of *advaita*, which substantially unites what on the surface may appear different and disparate, but is instead identical and One in its deepest essence. This principle is perceived by Coleridge as a unifying, dialogic and non-divisive knowledge: on the other hand, many other romantic poets also found useful inspiration in their personal search for Unity through Hindu doctrines. In the text in question, this research is declined through the re-reading of *The Conversation and Other Poems* (*The Eolian Harp* and others), *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* and what in my opinion is the highest point of Riem’s work, that is, the analysis dedicated to the dream of *Kubla Khan*.

In conclusion this work is not only able to provide a detailed critical study of the constant perception of Hindu doctrines in Coleridge’s writings and in particular in his poetry, but is also able to portray the English poet as a sort of ambassador of the very concept of dialogicity, paraphrasing Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010), a world-renowned interreligious and intercultural scholar. Dialogical-dialogue consists in going beyond the dialectic, in order to arrive at a real knowledge of the other. This allows a true mutual communication with the aim of constituting a common language, capable of transcending the limits of one’s own particular language. Therefore the dialogical-dialogue and the interconnection of different disciplines are the basis of a coherent systemic and complex picture which should also characterize the contemporary science of modern scholars, who nevertheless share a unifying vision of life. It is a multidisciplinary that feeds on a joint search for what is common and what is different, on reciprocal fertilization, on mutual enrichment. The poet, supposedly endowed with profound intellectual curiosity and metaphysical sensitivity, is finally a pioneer of scientific and philosophical progress. Precisely because – just to paraphrase Coleridge’s thought matured on the Indian imaginary – spiritual research and the creative process are fundamental both for art and for science. Which in traditional India, in fact, are not disjointed knowledges.