

# Antonella Riem Natale *Coleridge and Hinduism*

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

It is almost a truism to speak about the impact and fascination that the East, and India in particular, have had on the West, especially with regard to literature, art and architecture, spanning suggestive lyrics and orientalist seductive paintings. In reality, connections and contacts can be more than superficial echoes, as this ambitious, accurately researched and innovative volume by Antonella Riem Natale tries to demonstrate, bringing to the fore some aspects of the complexity and dynamics of human experience. In particular, the author invites the reader to explore and question the artistic pathway of one of the most significant voices of the Romantic period, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This is a writer who exhibits a multiple and dense relation with India, hence the powerful influences of Indian religions and philosophies in his works. However, what the scholar aims to do here is not a mere classification of oriental echoes in the literary discourse of the English poet, but rather a critical and thought-provoking analysis of Coleridge's approach to, and subsequent revision of, the Hindu heritage. But before proceeding, it is perhaps worth mentioning that the very word 'Hinduism' was coined by the British colonisers to define the religion of the Hindu populations as if it were a unitary phenomenon, whereas in reality it encompasses a series of time-honoured traditions. And this means dealing with a difficult theme, which lends itself to various kinds of interpretation.



**Edizioni**  
Ca'Foscari

Submitted 2023-07-04  
Published 2023-12-18

**Open access**

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**Citation** Adami, E. (2023). Review of *Coleridge and Hinduism*, by Riem Natale, A. *Il Tolomeo*, 25, 341-346.

DOI 10.30687/Tol/2499-5975/2023/01/033

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Nonetheless, Riem Natale takes up this challenge, and from the very beginning she points out the key importance for Coleridge of the notion of the *Advaita*, the sense of ‘non-dualism’, or doctrinal position for a ‘non-dual’ understanding of Reality, in the quest for Oneness. The main merits of this original essay is that, even if it refers to dense religious and philosophical concepts, these latter are carefully treated, contextualised and eventually made accessible to readers. Structurally, the volume opens with a Preface (“The ‘Unstruck Sound’, a Metaphor for Oneness”, xi-xxvii), it offers a rich introductory chapter that frames the scholar’s project (“Coleridge’s Philosophical and Metaphysical Ideas and Background”, 1-115), then develops a series of four chapters (respectively entitled “Conversation and Other Poems” (116-81), “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (182-237), “‘Kubla Khan’ or a Vision in a Dream”, (238-78), and “‘Christabel’ – Women and Vision”, 279-331), and presents some final remarks (“By Way of Conclusion”, 332-3).

The introduction clarifies the author’s idea of applying a specific critical lens to Coleridge’s writing, i.e. one that includes the influences from Hinduism, in particular the concept of *Advaita*, as well as other theories, traditions and ideas. In particular, the sense of non-dualism is significant since “Coleridge states his quest for oneness, wholeness and unity, both in prose and poetry” (60), and therefore it becomes a sort of guiding paradigm. The volume takes into account a range of different authors, philosophies and contexts. Such inclusiveness is driven by the wish to

learn anew, to put all ‘texts’ – written and oral – in a profitable dialogical dialogue with one another, in order to have a more complete understanding of what we are studying, reading, listening to. (33)

Riem’s critical scaffolding documents and discusses a series of interconnections between Coleridge’s work and life-experience, the impact of Oriental philosophies, the interest in the circulation of sacred texts from India, such as the *Bhagavadgītā* (translated into English in 1785 by Charles Wilkins), but also the impact of such a wealth for the development of knowledge and progress in the contemporary world. In the words of the author, in fact,

Hinduism and Coleridge perceive the universe as an organic cosmos in rhythmical movement, and their cosmogonies are very close to the scientific models of modern quantum physics. (68)

The first chapter examines a series of poems and texts by Coleridge to look at the depth of the poet’s reflection on the concept of ‘being’ from his early years, because

a desire for circularity, as a figure of mystery and return to Oneness, is already present in the very first poems Coleridge writes, like, for example *Sonnet to the Autumnal Moon* written in 1788, when he was only sixteen. (116)

In this part, Riem focuses on lyrics such as *The Aeolian Harp* (composed in blank verse in 1795 and published in 1796), which testifies “inner and metaphysical poetical evolution, occurring through devotional love, or Bhakti” (136) for the Romantic writer’s, as well as *Dejection: An Ode*, initially written as a letter to Sara Hutchinson, a woman who was not his wife. Here, he talks in which he talks about his feelings of love for her, but also employs different images for the wind, evoking imagination, fancy and the mind. As the scholar puts it,

the wind, in Hindu doctrine and for Coleridge, is a divine energy, strictly associated with the creative power of speech: Vayu (vital wind) is the cosmic breath and the Word. (159)

The poet’s attraction to nature and his thoughts about a sense of empathy, connection and communication is also evident in *Hymn Before Sun-Rise in the Vale of Chamouni*, published for the first time in 1802, and organised through 85 lines that give voice to jubilation and admiration for the divine spirit present in natural elements like mountains and water falls.

The case-study tackled in the following chapter is perhaps Coleridge’s best-known work, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, whose initial parts seem to

already articulate a series of figures and signs that certainly can be linked to many esoteric and alchemic traditions, but also to Oriental philosophy. (186)

The style and texture of the Rime is characterised by a feeling of almost exotic magic, but in reality the narrative’s symbolic essence triggers references and echoes, for example when we consider the arrow used by the Mariner to kill the Albatross. As Riem underlines, “in the *Upaniṣad* the arrow represents the swiftness of fiery intuition that in a single instant, beyond Time-Space, reaches and unveils eternity” (192), and this sense of intertextuality and correspondences reverberates across the entire text. Thus we come across symbolic elements such as the Moon, which for Hinduism relates to the aim of the ancestors’ soul, renewed for a new creative cycle, or the allusions to the archetype of the Mother (“Heaven’s Mother send us grace!”, in the third part of the Rime), which triggers images of both powerful Kali, the terrific, dark aspect of the Goddess, and the “vital universal force, the spiritual Principle expressed in a feminine form” (205).

The third chapter too pivots around one of Coleridge's main works, namely *Kubla Khan*, a text that was composed one night after an opium-influenced dream. The poet had read a book about Shangdu, the summer capital of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty of China founded by Kublai Khan, hence the source of his fanciful connections. Completed in 1795 and published in 1816, the poem intertwines and elaborates a host of images, metaphors and motifs. According to Riem, "the three phases of the poem are also linked to the three different faculties of the Intellect: Rationality, Fancy and Imagination" (241). But there are also emblematic correspondences, for instance the river Aleph seems to trigger watery suggestions:

For the Hindu it is the *Gaṅgā*, the purifying river flowing from *Śiva's* hair: it is the superior waters bringing purification and liberation. It is said that the *Gaṅgā* reproduces the *Axis Mundi*, for it runs a triple way, like the Alph. (254)

According to Hindu thought, all rivers are sacred and are associated with feminine forms of deity, from Yamuna to Saraswati.

What follows is a chapter devoted to the analysis of *Christabel* (1778-1780), a narrative ballad dedicated to a diaphanous nature, somehow akin to the magical dimension of exotic narratives such as the *Arabian Nights*, whose first English-language rendition dates back to the period 1706-1721. The protagonist of this composition is a homonymous female figure whose encounter with a stranger called Geraldine represents the starting point for a number of events. For the scholar,

Coleridge tries again to clarify for himself the relation between the logical and ontological aspects of the universal, focusing on the earthly life of a woman-as-Christ. (282)

In this text too, there are many issues that can resonate in parallel with the lore of Hinduism and its octopus-like traditions, for example regarding the presence of the door, the snake, the tolling bell, which can be viewed as symbolic elements connected with stories, images and rituals.

In the last section, the author tries to draw some concluding remarks but she wisely warns that, given the focus of her study, it is not easy to disentangle such a complex discourse, in which various disciplines, texts and forms of knowledge productively overlap and hybridise one with the other, from the *Bhagavadgītā* to the *Institutes of Hindu Law* or the *Ordinance of Manu*. Riem then stresses how

the net of influxes, echoes and cross-references that it is possible to find in an omnivorous, voracious reader such as Coleridge is

enormous, but this root running subterranean from the far sides of the sacred *Gaṅgā* river to the river Alph seemed a yet unexplored field. (332)

Here lies the gist of such galvanising research, and the need to continue to explore new thematic pathways. In this light, as it unfolds Coleridge's powerful and expressive lyrics and words, the volume also suggests a reflection on the very sense of being (self and other), which should always follow

the *anahāta cakra*, the centre of the heart, where oneness resides and the subtle vibration of the *anāhata nāda*, the “unstruck sound of life”, can be heard and felt. (XI-XII)

