

## 書 評

David Vallins, Kaz Oishi and Seamus Perry, eds.,  
*Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient: Cultural  
Negotiations* (London: Bloomsbury Academic,  
2013)

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It is much more difficult to write a review on an essay collection than on a standard scholarly monograph. In the latter there is only one writer to consider, but in the former there may be a dozen holding widely differing views. For example, with respect to Edward Said, whom David Vallins mentions (in the ‘Introduction’) as ‘a constant presence’ over the subject of Orientalism, he is variously—depending on the contributor—promoted, negotiated with, bypassed, even ignored entirely. Given this situation, the polemical nature of Said’s signature work, not to mention postcolonial criticism due to Said, I will foreground what I believe to be the issues at stake above and beyond the impressive range of material that this book brings into play.

‘The Orient’, much like the word ‘Asia’ today, encompasses a vast, historically variable geographical area inhabited by the majority of the world’s population. Under the influence of Said, ‘Orientalism’ has become a byword to criticize how the French, British and Germans understood this region and its peoples:

For any European during the nineteenth century—and I think one can say this almost without qualification—Orientalism was such a system of truths, truths in Nietzsche’s sense of the the word. It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.

For liberal humanists who believe in the moral authority of literature—for the Romanticist in particular—the consideration that every Romantic (including of course, Coleridge) might be ‘without qualification... a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric’ is a bitter pill to swallow. For leftwing historicists however, like Peter Kitson, Said is an ally, and his chapter on ‘The ‘kowtow controversy’ and Representations of Asian Ceremonials in Romantic Literature’, which headlines the collection, is a demonstration of his ease and facility with Said as much as his broad knowledge of the Romantics in general. Situating the kowtow in its contextual complexity, Kitson traces how the ritual was gradually simplified in narratives, first of the McCartney embassy, later in Romantic verse and prose, into a symbol of the racist stereotype Said labelled ‘Oriental despotism’.

But Said is a hard taskmaster, whose uncompromising use results in a literary interpretation—especially when exercised by a critic with a colonial ancestry—that can seem, to say the least, a case of self-loathing or self-flagellation. Indeed, the two writers that follow, Deirdre Coleman and Tim Fulford have a far greater problem with Said. Coleman’s ‘The ‘dark tide of time’: Coleridge and William Hodges’ India’ never once mentions Said, but her use of Shaffer (‘all of Asia is present in one spot’ in Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’, etc) marks her as not so much ignorant of Said as anti-Saidian. It is otherwise quite impossible to flap a redder flag before the postcolonial bull: speaking as a Chinese Singaporean, to think that not only my country but also the entire geography (‘Asia’) ascribed to me (as an ‘Asian’) might be represented in a single work, no matter how ‘great’, leaves me feeling miniaturized into one of Charles Lamb or Leigh Hunt’s painted teacup people. Coleman’s thesis that Hodges’ textual and visual work on India influenced ‘Kubla Khan’, pursued with élan and skill, adds as much as to our appreciation of the poem as it downplays the historical deprecation of the subcontinent: Hodges was, after all, a propagandist on the side of the rapacious colonial administration that was directly responsible for the ‘decline and fall’ of India he ostensibly lamented in his work. Tim Fulford’s ‘Coleridge’s Sequel to *Thalaba* and Robert Southey’s Prequel to *Christabel*’,

I suspect, would please postmodernists and aggravate postcolonialists in equal measure. His clever, willfully paradoxical exegesis essentially of a lacuna—Coleridge and Robert Southey’s failure to write an epic poem on Prophet Mohammed—invokes Said only to confine him within the most limiting of pentagrams. According to Fulford, the orientalism of *Thalaba* and *Christabel* was literary rather than classically Saidian because both poets never aimed ‘transparently to portray verifiable historical events’. Moreover, Fulford seems to suggest, *Christabel* escapes the Saidian critique because it is impossible to tie its passages down to specific places in the Orient, due to their being not so much about the Orient at all but ‘allegories of the poet’s creativity’.

If Said were alive, I can very well imagine him saying to this, ‘I am not Saidian’. Said’s ‘*Orientalism*’ is not simply a misreading, but the development in the eighteenth century of a knowledge project in Britain, France and Germany to facilitate the ideological and political will to power of one group of people, identifying themselves as ‘European’, over another group of people consistently and compulsively identified in the nineteenth century as ‘Oriental’. Instead of trying to undermine Said, the next two writers, Seamus Perry and Kaz Oishi, have chosen to focus instead on the reception of *Coleridge* in Japan in the early twentieth century, when cracks begin to appear (as Said himself allows) in the lens of ‘Orientalism’. ‘Coleridge, William Empson and Japan’ is about William Empson’s teaching stint at Tokyo University, and how his immersion in Buddhism and a life in Japan helped him write so resonantly on the first published version of Coleridge’s ‘Ancient Mariner’. I know Perry’s droll piece has inspired one Chinese PhD student at the Romantic Connections conference of 2014 to give a paper on Empson’s subsequent, wartime posting to Beijing National University. As for Oishi’s ‘Oriental Aesthetes and Modernity’, it slyly turns the ‘Oriental’ lens back on the ‘Occidental’ by showing how Japanese scholars and poets exoticized Coleridge as a sensual fatalist. According to Oishi, this was a combination of the influence of Lafcadio Hearn, who also taught at Tokyo University, privileging the stranger, gothic poems, and a nationalistic desire on the part of the Japanese literati themselves to assert

their own modernity as a people from an advanced, industrialized society.

Oishi's essay, seen in the wider context of diplomatic efforts on the part of Japan to achieve parity with the leading nations of Europe, and to be considered as 'white' for the purposes of immigration into America, highlights how labels such as 'Oriental', 'European' (etc), are not only heavily ideological, as Said perceived, but also how widely and uncritically they were accepted by the nations who in the end repulsed these moves. More philosophically minded literary critics, however, tend to be unfriendly to Said. And this is certainly the case with the four, more philosophy-centred essays that follow. After all, isn't philosophy as a discipline supposed to allow the philosopher the detachment to perceive such 'mind-forg'd manacles' as the stereotypes of Orientalism? The stakes are especially high, I think, with regard to Coleridge, who was—as Andrew Warren's 'Coleridge, Orient, Philosophy' states—'British Romanticism's most systematic and wide-ranging philosopher'. Also, if these stereotypes were as dominant ideologically as Said suggested, then how is it that there were people in the twentieth century—as Said also suggested—who were able to write in a markedly different way on people living outside Europe? According to Warren, these stereotypes were never completely stable in the first place: Orientalism, as a discourse was a negotiation between 'the Orient' as object and as ontological source, was structured 'by larger patterns in the history of thought and the workings-out of empire'. While Said is never far away from David Vallins' 'Immanence and Transcendence in Coleridge's Orient', he is really more of an intellectual obstacle to be surmounted than a tutelary spirit. Vallins agrees with Said's 'Orientalism' as a general rubric, and even quotes Coleridge's criticism of 'the crass and sensual Cosmotheism of the Hindoos' to underscore the point. But Vallins' main objective is to uphold 'Kubla Khan' as an exception to Orientalism: a work staged in the 'East' that manages to escape the racist, imperialistic framework of the times.

The next two philosophically orientated essays, Natalie Tal Harries' on 'Coleridge and Hinduism' and Setuko Wake-Naota's comparison of 'Coleridge, Schopenhauer and Japanese Esoteric Buddhism', do not engage with the

phenomenon of Orientalism at all. Harries takes a closer look at Coleridge's view of Hinduism, convincingly distinguishing three distinct stages: positive enthusiasm in the 1790s, 'balanced' ambivalence in the early 1800s, and unconditionally negative after 1817. It is a change that she examines on an entirely biographical level, unnecessarily—I think—missing out on the broader, historiography offered by Said. To me, for example, the personal drama of Coleridge's increasingly critical stance on Hinduism is in perfect tandem with the intellectual current that was steadily and systematically demoting all things 'Eastern' on the ladder of civilization. Wake-Naota's essay, which relates Coleridge's ideas of a moral disinterestedness with Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Kobo Daishi Kukai, is high philosophy in its attempt to draw philosophers from very different places and times together. While their intellectual sympathies and coincidences in thinking are subtly teased out, postcolonial literary critics will find her idealistic framework jarring. The philosophical disinterestedness that Wake-Naoto finds in Coleridge might have allowed 'universal respect' and 'truer relationships with other people', but the fact was—at least as far as their dealings with the peoples of India and China were concerned—historically, he and his peers fell far short.

Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' is an even more 'constant presence' in the collection than Said's *Orientalism*, which is the single, most frequently returned to work for biographical, historical and cultural resonances. The three essays in the concluding section all have the poem as their starting point. Given how heavily read 'Kubla Khan' already is, is there anything truly substantial left to bring to the table? Thus, it is perhaps understandable why, instead of looking at the poem itself, Heidi Thomson chooses to focus on 'the 1816 Preface'. While the journey she takes us on is wide-ranging—from Coleridge's childhood, his brother's death in India, to Napoleon in Elba and Saint-Helena, Byron and the marketing strategy surrounding the publication of the poem itself—one or two of these connections should have been further developed. The search for something original to say on 'Kubla Khan' can be treated, of course, as Dometa Wiegand Brothers evidently does, as an intellectual challenge. In

this, Brothers' is surprisingly successful in her careful demonstration of the theological and scientific resonance of the repetition of the number 5, which I had barely noticed before reading her essay. The postcolonial critic would however wish that she had more to say on the problematic 'syncretist and essentializing tendencies' she detects 'in the Oriental study in general', especially how they might relate to the very exotic representations of China that she makes reference to. The final essay of the collection, Kuri Katsuyama's 'The Geopolitics of the Chinese Garden', situates the first 36 lines of 'Kubla Khan' in the context of contemporary accounts of Chinese gardens, as well as the political situation in England in the 1790s. Though Katsuyama never mentions Said directly, the striking coincidences she notices between Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and Lord Macartney's private journal entries, which Coleridge never actually read, certainly reinforce Said's point about how 'Orientalism' was increasingly dictating how the 'East' could be read and written about.

*Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient* is without doubt a considerable contribution to Coleridge scholarship. By writing consistently in the spirit of Said, by making plain my own understanding of his work, I hope I have succeeded in conveying the preoccupations of each essay clearly enough for the reader to detect, quickly and efficiently, the ones that are likely to appeal to her from her own ideological standpoint.