Coleridge, Romanticism, and the Orient: Cultural Negotiations

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THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE on 'Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient' was held in the beautiful port city of Kobe. In order to reach it I flew into Osaka, boarded the Shinkaisoku train to Sannomiya and the Port Liner to Port Island where Kobe International Conference Centre is located. Simultaneously exhausted and wide awake I squinted up at the numerous hotels in the glorious sunshine, desperately trying to identify mine in order to access my room and collapse under the air conditioner. Eventually, having successfully completed this vital mission, I ventured downstairs to the hotel restaurant and embarked upon the difficult task of communicating my vegetarian needs and desires. The exceptionally friendly waiting staff did their best to accommodate me, with varying degrees of success, but the discovery of an egg sandwich at 4am in the 7/11 across the road inspired me with such joy that I could have written an ode on the subject. Thankfully the world was spared my 'Ode to an Egg Sandwich' as I managed to get some sleep instead before hurrying to the conference centre just in time for the first presentation.

The conference opened with Deidre Coleman's plenary lecture on India in Coleridge's writings of the 1790s. Her paper focused on William Hodge's Travels in India (1793) and its visual record of India as an important source for the Romantics. She re-evaluated the symbolism of 'Kubla Khan' in the context of Indian scholarship, such as the translations of William Jones and Charles Wilkins, in addition to Hodge's account of the British as 'the new Mogul emperors of India', drawing several correspondences between the images of India in Hodge's text and the imagery in 'Kubla Khan'. Finally, she argued that these aspects of Coleridge's Oriental scholarship support 'a shift in geopolitical readings of "Kubla Khan" from China to India'. I was intrigued by Coleman's interpretation, as my own research is concerned with Coleridge and India so, for me, the recognition of Indian elements in the overtly Chinese setting of 'Kubla Khan' was particularly interesting.

The parallel sessions that followed included two additional papers on 'Kubla Khan'. Heidi Thomson discussed Coleridge's negotiations of genius in the poem by identifying an oscillation between the demands and desires of 'commanding genius' and 'absolute genius' throughout. Dometa Wiegand's paper, on the other hand, explored the mathematical symbolism of 'Kubla Khan'. She identified the influence of Newtonian calculus and geometric signs in Coleridge's poetry and thought which culminated in a fusion between imagination, mathematics and exoticised settings. Both papers provided an alternative interpretation of the themes and symbolism of 'Kubla Khan', enriching my own interpretation of the poem.

The reception dinner was held in the Sky Lounge of the Kobe Portpia Hotel. Located on the thirtieth floor, with expansive windows spanning across the restaurant, the view of Kobe as the sun set behind the Rokko mountains was magnificent. We were all supplied with local saké in preparation for the speeches and toasts that preceded dinner. Although the number and extensive nature of these speeches did seem a little comical at the time, and reminiscent of an elaborate wedding reception, they essentially constituted an entirely justifiable celebration of the success of the conference organisers. The enormous efforts of Kaz Oishi and the conference committee in ensuring that this wonderful event could take place, especially in the wake of the devastating Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami four months earlier, certainly deserved our commendation, appreciation and lengthy applause. When dinner was served I was given further cause for celebration as I was provided with several courses of delicious vegetarian cuisine, whilst enjoying the stimulating conversation and good company of my fellows at the special dietary requirement table.

The following morning, Andrew Warren presented his paper, 'Coleridge, Philosophy, Orient', which positioned the Orient as both an object and a source for Romantic philosophy. The first part of his paper focused on Coleridge's appraisal of Oriental philosophy. Warren explained that Coleridge encapsulated the origin of philosophy as a rupture between subject and object followed by various attempts to reconcile that division. The unification of subject and object is characteristic of Oriental philosophy but, as there is no initial distinction between the two, Coleridge did not consider it to be comparable with Greek philosophy. I found Warren's insight particularly intriguing as he used it to explain the shift in 'Kubla Khan' between unified order and the concern that this unity is illusory and fleeting.

After a greatly appreciated cup of tea, I attended Tim Fulford's illuminating paper 'Coleridge, Southey, *Thalaba* and *Christabel*'. It explored the implications of the poetic collaboration of Coleridge and Southey in the autumn of 1799 and the influence of *Christabel* on Southey in December 1800. I was particularly interested in the discussion of the 'cross-fertilisation' of the two poets in 1799. Fulford explained that they worked side by side, Coleridge on 'Kubla Khan' and Southey on *Thalaba*, and may have influenced each other considerably. They were both fascinated with similar concepts – Southey with self-righteous conviction and Coleridge with the psychology of belief – and Fulford argued that both poems were changed by the meeting. This interpretation was supported by specific examples, such as the 'stately palace' passage in *Thalaba* and the 'stately pleasure dome' of 'Kubla Khan', which could be seen as evidence of the influence of 'Kubla Khan' on *Thalaba* or vice-versa.

I also thoroughly enjoyed Seamus Perry's engaging lecture on William Empson and Japan which was concerned with Empson's interest in, and unconventional reading of, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), which Perry explained was the main product of Empson's time in Japan, includes an unchristian reading of the poem. Perry outlined Empson's

long engagement with the *Rime*, defended Empson's interpretation and suggested how his experiences in Japan, and interest in Buddhism, helped him to formulate his thesis on the poem.

Later that afternoon, David Vallins discussed immanence and transcendence in Coleridge's Orient and, noting the relevance of his topic to my own research, I was particularly keen to hear his paper. He asserted that, for Coleridge, India was a source of recollection between self and other and referred to both Neoplatonic and Hindu influences on Coleridge's poetry and theosophy. Vallins suggested that Coleridge's anxiety of elevation, or transcendence, was combined with a moral anxiety about reconciling spirituality with the earthly. He referred to 'Kubla Khan', *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and 'Lewti' to illustrate how Coleridge presents the transcendence of dualism in Oriental or remote settings which unify and transcend the material world. Vallins concluded that all of these broadly 'eastern' settings are used by Coleridge to reflect forms of consciousness transcending unknown bounds. I was inspired by this paper and found it extremely helpful for my own inquiry into the influence of Neoplatonism and Hinduism on Coleridge's mode of expressing transcendental or visionary experience.

On the final day, I presented my own paper and Masashi Suzuki delivered the closing lecture on Coleridge and Blake's notions of the system of the fine arts in terms of Swedenborg's 'Science of Correspondencies'. Suzuki suggested that both notions are characterised by the utopian equality of rank among the fine arts by a common medium. For Coleridge this medium was poetry and for Blake it was man.

This thought-provoking interpretation was followed by an address by Kaz Oishi who eloquently summarised the 36 papers we had heard over the course of the conference. In addition to the papers I have mentioned, several other papers on Coleridge focused on 'Kubla Khan', *The Wanderings of Cain, Christabel* and the philosophical and religious aspects and influences of Coleridge's work. Other Romantic writers were also discussed, namely Blake, Wordsworth, De Quincey, Lamb, Southey, Shelley, Mary Shelley, Keats and Burns. Some of these papers will be featured in POETICA, an international journal published in Tokyo, including Alan Bewell on 'Romantic Mobility', Felicity James on Manning and Lamb, Mie Gotoh on Keats, Keiko Ikeda on Shelley and Byron and Yoshiki Nakamura on 'Coleridge's Liberalism'. Finally, several speakers analysed the work of other writers; some drew correspondences with Coleridge and other Romantic writers and others concentrated on Oriental aspects, which provided an even greater diversity to the range of subjects covered.

Overall, the conference was a great success and an incredible experience in a truly inspiring Oriental setting. I would like to thank the Friends of Coleridge for the bursary that enabled me to attend. It was remarkable to see scholars from all over the world unite to discuss the Romantic conception and expression of what, as Coleridge phrased it in 'The Night-Scene', 'eastern sages paint', that which was 'Feared as an alien, and too vast for man'.