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Coleridge, Isherwood and Hindu Light

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This essay explores the versatility of light, as conceived in Hinduism, as an intellectual tool used to mediate the contrary impulses of body and soul. I discuss two authors who addressed this classic philosophical ambivalence by reference to light-based cosmology theorised in *Bhagavad Gita* and other Hindu texts. In 1802, Samuel Taylor Coleridge felt that the tension between his mental and physical lives had reached crisis, and ~~originated—caused his professional and domestic failures~~~~diverse personal problems~~. He articulated the perceived conflict in 'Dejection: An Ode', based on the longer and more confessional verse-correspondence known as 'Letter to —'. In 1939, Christopher Isherwood (1904–86) arrived in the United States from Berlin, where he left a lover who had been conscripted by the German army. Isherwood was physically and emotionally drained. Developments in Europe disappointed his liberal ideology. At the onset of war, Isherwood became frustrated at his own pacifism, which he wished could take an active rather than an incapacitating form. Isherwood's inaction is comparable to the paralysis Coleridge identifies famously in Hamlet and himself, in which the prince's 'senses are in a state of trance'.¹ Coleridge elaborates:

All that is excellent in nature is combined in Hamlet, with the exception of this one quality: he is a man living in meditation, called upon <to act> by every motive human & divine but the great purpose of [...] life defeated by continuously resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve (*Lectures on Literature, i*, 390).

Comment [SW1]: I'm not sure what is meant here – needs a slight rephrase perhaps?

The temptations of Hollywood stimulated Isherwood's guilt that such a life was no longer available to his former partner. Isherwood recalls that when he raged against religion in conversation, W. H. Auden replied, 'Careful, careful, my dear—if you keep going on like that, you'll have *such* a conversion, one of these days!'² Arguably Auden was correct as, soon after, Isherwood adopted the life of an ascetic.

As remedy to their crises, both Coleridge and Isherwood adopted the Indian quest for the realisation of inner light. Yet they did so by opposite means. Coleridge's search for the Hindu light is primarily intellectual engagement based on reading, while Isherwood's is bodily adherence to practices of self-cultivation. I interpret 'Dejection' as an experiment in which Coleridge uses Indian philosophy to explore the discord between his scholarly and sensuous identities. As it reconciles this apparent contradiction, the Indian conception of divine light allows Coleridge to imagine the resolution of his unrequited love for the addressee of 'Dejection', Sara Hutchinson. By contrast, Isherwood devoted himself to the divine light physically by a deepening involvement with a Hindu meditation centre, where he resided from 1943 for much of the next four decades.

Isherwood's memoir *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980) documents his time at the centre in California, with focus on his relationship with the guru, a humorous and affectionate Indian monk named Prabhavananda. *Gu* refers to 'shadows' and *ru* to 'dispersal'; by instruction in meditation, the 'venerable' and paternal guru dispels the illusion of quotidian existence and guides the student to perception of the mysterious, universal light that constitutes supreme reality.³ Usually Isherwood refers to Prabhavananda as 'Swami', a title that refers to union with the supreme reality. In view of Isherwood's mentor, it is probable that Auden perceived the threat that Hinduism posed to their friendship, at one time a creative symbiosis comparable to that of Wordsworth and Coleridge.⁴ Undoubtedly it is with

Isherwood in mind that Auden mocks W. B. Yeats's interest in mysticism, as his 'Southern Californian element'; Auden identifies such pursuits with the 'lower-middle class' to suggest that Yeats and Isherwood should know better.⁵ There is resemblance, too, to what R. F. Foster terms Yeats's 'Protestant magic' in Isherwood's evaluation of his own low spirits. Isherwood recalls both Hamlet's inaction and Coleridge's depression-related hypochondria, but diagnoses this state according to the terminology of his newly-adopted discipline: 'I felt steeped in that dull brutish inaction that the Hindus call *tamas*, the lowest condition of the psyche. My misery expressed itself in various minor ailments'.⁶ Foster attributes Yeats's interests in the occult and Indian philosophy to his estrangement, as a Protestant, from the rituals and superstitions of a predominantly Catholic population. Esoteric studies might compensate for that difference and thus enable Yeats to overcome a perceived obstacle to his credibility as a champion of Irish nationalism. Yeats's eclectic pursuits therefore constitute both 'a search for psychic control' of the self *per se*, and an attempt to complete his political identity amidst a millenarian environment in which 'occultism had a particularly Irish relevance'.⁷ Similarly, Isherwood's meditative search for light is ostensibly personal and psychological, but also lends credibility to his wartime pacifism by the potential for an inner journey to compensate for – or justify – outer inaction. Isherwood's initial encounter with Hindu light is performative rather than scholarly, Coleridge's is entirely literary; gradually the two authors move towards convergence in their experiences.

Coleridge's primary sources on Hinduism were the works of the great eighteenth-century Orientalist William Jones (1746–94) and his protégé Thomas Maurice (1754–1824). In his *History of Hindostan* (1795–1820), Maurice gives detailed accounts of Hindu myth and cosmology. His method is to validate Indian culture where it appears cognate with Biblical history, Egyptian astronomy, and Graeco-Roman culture. Maurice insists, for example, that Buddha is the same figure as Hermes.⁸ Similarly, for compatibility with his own religious

perspective, Maurice portrays Hinduism as a dualistic theology, while some commentators describe it as pantheistic, others as *panentheistic*, to mean that god pervades the universe, but the universe only constitutes a part of this god. Other theorists still, including Isherwood in his *Vedanta* volume, interpret Hinduism as impersonal, a natural philosophy in which the omnipresent essence is not a god (5). Maurice identifies a number of Hinduism's parallels with Western philosophies, and notes the existence of 'a particular sect of philosophers in India, in their principles very much resembling the modern Spinozists' (*History of Hindostan*, 395). Based on his reading of Maurice, Coleridge claims in a lecture on the history of philosophy that the 'practices' of Neo-Platonists are 'exactly like those of the Brahmins', the Hindu ritualists.⁹

Comment [SW2]: Shortened title needed – *History of Hindostan*

What remains consistent in all studies of Hinduism is that the divine light is considered literal and subtly manifest in all. Maurice describes 'a golden egg, blazing like a thousand stars, in which was born BRAHMA [...] the invisible cause, self-existing but unperceived' (*History of Hindostan*, 55). In Maurice's account Brahma, the Hindu god associated with creation, permeates the physical universe as 'a certain pure ætherial light [...], not perceptible to the elementary sense, but extracted from the all-comprehensive essence of his own perfections' (64). To perceive and commune with the all-pervasive light is the goal of Hinduism, which the devotee attempts by the self-cultivatory practice of yoga. Coleridge learned of yoga primarily in Charles Wilkins's 1785 translation of *Bhagavad Gita*, the Indian epic in which the avatar Krishna, a manifestation of the divine light, counsels the warrior Arjuna on the eve of battle. The conflict symbolises the struggle between body and soul. Hence Krishna's advice centres on the delusive nature of sense-perception and the methods of yogic meditation:

Comment [SW3]: And here too

He, whose business is the restraining of his passions, should sit, with his mind fixed on one object alone, in the exercise of his devotion for the purification of his soul, keeping his head, his neck, his body, steady without motion, his eyes fixed on the point of his nose, looking at no other place around.¹⁰

In his memoir, Isherwood documents his attempts to perceive the inner light during meditation, a task he approaches initially with Tennysonian ‘honest doubt’ (*My Guru*, 10). The Swami tells him, ‘Approach this light and say, “Oh Self, reveal yourself to me”’. In his diary Isherwood evaluates the process of visualisation as ‘silly’ and complains that his teacher ‘is too Indian for me’, but he persists (43). Later, Isherwood reports success; he describes ‘an orange light [...], like firelight.’ He proceeds, ‘A face began to form. It was my own face.’ According to the Swami, Isherwood has discovered his own *atman*, which Isherwood interprets as his ‘real self’ (63–64).

Comment [SW4]: Reference to *In Memoriam* needed, with edition, in endnote

Comment [MC5]: More concise to cite Isherwood’s use of the phrase?

Comment [SW6]: Shortened title needed

Informed by descriptions in *Bhagavad Gita*, Coleridge expresses attraction to the serenity of Hindu meditation prior to the composition of ‘Dejection’. Yet in appreciation of the bodily relaxation in yoga, he appears oblivious to the mental effort involved, probably because the authorities he consults draw entirely upon textual research rather than practice. Writing to John Thelwall in 1797, Coleridge anticipates the crisis of 1802 and the meditative solution he attempts in ‘Dejection’. Impatient with Coleridge’s apparent dilettantism, the critic John Drew esteems this passage ‘a travesty of the significance of traditional yogic teaching.’¹¹ Coleridge alludes to Hinduism as he continues a dialogue with Thelwall on the potential for the natural sublime to elevate the mind:

I can at times feel strongly the beauties, you describe [...]. My mind feels as if it ached to behold and know something great—something one and indivisible

[...]. At [...] times I adopt the Brahman Creed, and say—It is better to sit than to stand, it is better to lie than to sit, it is better to sleep than to wake—but Death is best of all!—I should much wish, like the Indian Vishna, to float along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotos, and wake once in a million years for a few minutes—just to know that I was going to sleep for a few million years more.¹²

The god Vishnu is the source of avatars including, for example, Krishna. Here Coleridge elicits a process by which a universal energy resolves into physical matter briefly, then returns to oblivion. It is the peaceful image of a churning, ‘infinite ocean’, in which the cycles of form and formlessness undoubtedly appeal to Coleridge’s lasting philosophical preoccupation with the relation of universality to multitude. There is a glimpse of yogic method in the practice Coleridge associates with a life of sensation, but he recognises only the external form of the devotee. Natalie Tal Harries observes that Coleridge’s reception of Hinduism in this passage is infused with an eighteenth-century European predilection for indolence as conducive to poetic vision.¹³ Coleridge acknowledges that ‘it is better to sit’, but identifies mental inactivity as the object, and deduces thence that more complete forms of physical resignation must be superior, specifically sleep and death. He does not intend to travesty yoga in the manner that Drew suggests, but is unaware of any? significance to the seated yogi beyond pleasurable relaxation, which Coleridge identifies as a receptive state. It is as though Coleridge considers the meditating yogi and Vishnu afloat as separate allegories for a state of indolence rather than, respectively, a practice and a metaphor for the visionary result of persistence in that practice. Drew wishes Coleridge to ~~interpret-identify~~ the yogi’s goal as direct experience of supreme reality, in which ~~is such~~ he perceives himself amidst an ocean of energetic flux, as-akin-to-the-image-of lotus-cradled Vishnu, adrift on a sea.

Comment [SW7]: Hard to follow

However, Coleridge lacks both Isherwood's guru to urge him towards visualisation in this state, and the modern scholarship available to Drew that explicates the 'significance of traditional yogic teaching'. Hence Coleridge, based on the limited information to hand, completes his interpretation of yoga by recourse to European conceptions of poetic indolence.

If not a matter of esoteric discipline, kinds of stillness became increasingly desirable to Coleridge. In another letter he expresses his suspicion that excessive scholarship causes sensuous atrophy, recalled in 'Dejection' by his attribution of the personal crisis primarily to 'abstruse research' (89).¹⁴ Coleridge writes to his wife in 1799 complaining that the work required as a student at the University of Göttingen debilitates him:

I have, at times, experienced such an extinction of *Light* in my mind, I have been so forsaken by all the *forms* and *colourings* of Existence, as if the *organs* of Life had been dried up; as if only simple BEING remained, blind and stagnant!² (*Collected Letters*, i. 470).

Comment [SW8]: Added emphasis?

Comment [MC9]: As quoted

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Coleridge intimates that excessive mental activity entails atrophy of the '*organs* of Life', but fears that to cultivate a placid mind – by which the perceptive power of those 'organs' would be heightened – necessitates neglect of worldly duties. In 'Dejection' Coleridge attempts to mediate these contrary impulses. He does not articulate a sentiment that scholarship is unequivocally detrimental, nor that a life of sensation is wholly preferable, nor even that the two can be neatly separated. Nor does he advocate indolence as a condition of heightened receptivity. Coleridge contemplates a more complex relationship between thinking and feeling, in which, as he puts it paradoxically, 'not to think' is the aim of his metaphysical investigations:

For not to think of what I needs must feel,
But to be still and patient, all I can;
And haply by abstruse research to steal
From my own nature all the natural Man—
This was my sole resource, my only plan:
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the habit of my Soul (87–93).

Coleridge pursues ‘abstruse research’ for more than scholarly interest. His reading of Maurice and Wilkins on Hinduism constitutes part of a sincere attempt to locate intellectual stimulus that might induce some realisation to alter him experientially. We can view this attempt within Coleridge’s wish to formulate a comprehensive philosophy that would unite and harmonise all knowledge. Coleridge consults diverse historical, literary and philosophical texts, hoping to source ideas that will disclose the system of the universe.¹⁵ He intends his prospective philosophical-system to offer a new perspective on life that would reconcile him to such assorted ‘afflictions’ as he laments in ‘Dejection’ (82). Hence, I stress a philosophical self-awareness amidst the lamentations of ‘Dejection’; the poet perceives the opportunity to experiment with his Hindu reading-material as a solution to his impasse.

In ‘Dejection’, Coleridge’s method of self-cultivation – ‘to be still and patient’ – recalls his reading of *Bhagavad Gita*, in which, as Wilkins translates,

Rest is called the means for him who hath attained devotion [...]. The *Yogee* of a subdued mind, thus employed in the exercise of his devotion, is compared to a lamp, standing in a place without wind, which waveth not. He delighteth in his own soul, where the mind, regulated by the service of devotion, is

pleased to dwell, and where, by the assistance of the spirit, he beholdeth the soul (62–64).

While the still mind burns brightly, Coleridge fears that intellect quells sensation; hence, a central complaint of ‘Dejection’ is that thought fails to inform or stimulate feeling. He announces an impasse in the second stanza of the poem in response to the moon, sky and clouds, which should move him but do not:

I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel how beautiful they are! (37–38)

Recourse to the familiar stimulus of the natural sublime has failed Coleridge. Nature rouses

his spirits ~~only feebly: no further than~~ ‘the dull sobbing draft’, he writes of ~~a~~ the wind,

Comment [SW10]: Perhaps needs a bit of tweaking?

~~that~~ moans and rakes

Upon the strings of this Æolian lute,
Which better far were mute (6–8).

In ‘The Eolian Harp’ (1796) Coleridge speculates,

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (44–48)

The weary Coleridge's call in 'Dejection' to mute the harp appears to signal a rejection of Pantheism. Yet while Thomas McFarland writes of *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* in the singular form, it is evident that Coleridge is interested in a variety of Pantheisms, of which he explores a different tradition in 'Dejection' from the Spinozism of the 'Eolian Harp.' Now Coleridge departs from Pantheism that submits entirely to an external force. Wilkins's *Bhagavad Gita* has provided Coleridge with the image of a flame-like mind whose kinship with the all-pervasive light can only be realised if it is sheltered from the winds of distraction. This supplants the idea of a soul that is acted upon from without in the manner of a wind-harp. Accordingly, in 'Dejection' Coleridge discounts the possibility that contemplation of natural phenomena can bring about connection to the universal joy. Coleridge reasons,

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within (45–46).

How to 'win': Coleridge expands the word and abbreviates his search to answer, 'within'. The 'fountains [...] within' comprise the key alteration of Coleridge's comprehension of Hinduism since the passive version of slumber and drift that he describes to Thelwall in 1797. In 'Dejection', Coleridge elaborates that the inner resource is light. He apprehends that effort is required to perceive the 'fountain [...] within' and encourage its light to radiate beyond the self:

from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud

Enveloping the Earth (53–55).

As in the Hindu experience of supreme reality, the state for which Isherwood strives, Coleridge imagines that to perceive the inner light is blissful:

This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,

This beautiful, and beauty-making power.

Joy, virtuous Lady!

[...]

Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—

We in ourselves rejoice! (62–72)

A **Pantheistic** union with Nature is possible because the inner light is manifest in all creation. To encourage the joyful light within therefore entails communion:

And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,

All melodies the echoes of that voice,

All colours a suffusion from that light (73–75).

Comparably, *Bhagavad Gita* states that ‘the man whose mind is endued with this devotion, and looketh on all things alike, beholdeth the supreme soul in all things, and all things in the supreme soul’ (65). To Isherwood this ‘supreme soul’ is the ‘eternal omnipresent Nature, of which everybody and everything is a part’ (*My Guru*, 9).

Like Coleridge, Isherwood apprehends intellectually that his *atman* must radiate outward in confluence with the light that permeates the universe, but the Swami informs him

Comment [SW11]: Is notion of Pantheisms that you raise earlier relevant here? See, also, bottom on p. 13 in relation to your interesting comment about ‘passive Pantheism’

that the philosophical knowledge in itself is insufficient. Isherwood must experience the all-pervasive light perceptually. With this aim, Isherwood attempts a regular process of visualisation, in which he imagines that the inner light he described in earlier meditation expands to occupy the entire universe. On one unsuccessful occasion – to the Swami’s amusement – Isherwood reports a vision not of light, but of a parrot (*My Guru*, 62). Isherwood is required to reevaluate his identity as an author amidst the contradictions of his yogic practice, in which muscular relaxation requires bodily discipline, a still mind is attained by strenuous psychological effort, and ambiguous distinctions exist between desirable and detrimental forms of intellectual activity. In Coleridge’s terms, ‘abstruse research’ should lead him, oxymoronically, ‘not to think of what I needs must feel’. Isherwood must similarly restrict his creative work to subjects that enhance his yogic practice. Hence he ceases to write screenplays for Hollywood, but produces newsletters for the meditation centre, and a translation of *Bhagavad Gita* (1944).

While the two authors reach similar conclusions concerning ‘abstruse research’, as a consequence of their dissimilar approaches to the Hindu light, Coleridge and Isherwood afford different status to sexuality within their efforts. Coleridge contemplates Hinduism within a greater attempt to attain a realisation that would alter his perception of the physical world, but which does not obviate a need for sexual fulfilment. In fact, as I will argue subsequently, the conclusion of ‘Dejection’ uses light imagery from Hindu philosophy to articulate a sexual act: the poetry becomes gradually more urgent; light and joy burst forth in a climax that is sexual. By contrast, Isherwood’s initial encounter with yoga follows his guilt-ridden separation from a lover. While he does not remain abstinent in the years that follow his initiation with the Swami, Isherwood’s turn towards asceticism appears at least partly an attempt at reciprocal celibacy in acknowledgement of the restricted lifestyle available to his conscripted former partner. The Swami warns that promiscuity depletes Isherwood physically

and distracts him from advancement. Isherwood's increasing devotion to yoga therefore entails attempts to suppress his sexual impulses. Isherwood recalls that 'the Swami's attitude was like that of a coach who tells his athletes that they must give up smoking, alcohol, and certain kinds of food, not because they are inherently evil, but because they may prevent the athlete from getting [...] an Olympic medal' (*My Guru*, 22). Isherwood struggles, and describes how he and a fellow ascetic use spiritual texts to assist them. In this context, Isherwood uses Hinduism purely as an intellectual resource, so that to 'think' might restrain the inclination to 'feel':

If we went out in the car during the afternoon, we took our book with us and the non-driver read it to the driver. This was supposed to keep us from watching for sexy pedestrians. It didn't, but it did divide the driver's attention by three—book, pedestrian, road—instead of by two, and was therefore the cause of several near-accidents (73).

In a diary entry, Isherwood reflects on Oedipus, a sexual transgressor and fellow renunciate: 'Woke murmuring a line from Yeats's translation of Oedipus at Colonus: "Even from that delight memory treasures so..." I read Yeats often, just now. He represents a most elegant kind of sexual sublimation' (104). From 'delight', Yeats's chorus warns, 'all entanglements of mankind grow' (*Oedipus at Colonus*, 960–61).¹⁶ Accordingly, Isherwood attempts to channel his sexual energies elsewhere, primarily into the activities of the Swami's meditation centre.

Coleridge employs Indian philosophy to imagine sexual fulfilment rather than as a discipline that requires sublimation. While Hinduism offers Coleridge an alternative to the passive Pantheism he has discarded, and a contemplative method that might disclose a

universal system, it also facilitates the solution to a problem that runs throughout 'Dejection'. Amidst its melodramatic confessions and vocational doubts, it is a love poem. A conventional desire for union with the addressee underpins the phases of personal complaint, natural description, and metaphysical flight in 'Dejection'. In the penultimate stanza, Coleridge dismisses his 'viper thoughts' (94):

I turn from you, and listen to the wind,
Which long has rav'd unnoticed. What a scream
Of agony by torture lengthen'd out
That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that rav'st without,
Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree,
Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,
Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,
Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
Mad Lutanist! (96–104)

Comment [SW12]: Is it important, given your commentary on the wind, that the speaker presents himself as disregarding of the ravings he proceeds to get excited about? Just a thought...

Initially it appears that Coleridge's avowed apostrophe has failed, as there is fit allegory here for his own spiritual turmoil rather than an utter change of subject. The pathetic fallacy could redouble his 'viper thoughts' rather than halting them. Yet the weather is also sexually charged. At the outset of the poem, Coleridge summoned a fury of elements that corresponded to his ardour for the addressee. The tempest he urged did not arise; a melancholy metaphor for impotence. The later 'Mad Lutanist' expresses Coleridge's intensified desire on having set aside his despair, which has been eased by the realisation that its cure lies 'within'. Despite the metaphysical revelations through which 'Dejection' progresses, the problem remains that the poet can 'see' his 'excellently fair' subject, but not

‘feel’ her, as it were. At this point in the poem, the light symbolism of *Bhagavad Gita* provides the bridge Coleridge requires between thinking and feeling.

In the final stanza the poet ostensibly takes consolation in vicarious experience of the Lady’s joy, but his interpretation of Hinduism also allows Coleridge a vision of consummation. Coleridge imagines that the all-pervasive light emanates from his subject:

To her may all things live, from Pole to Pole,
Their life the eddying of her living soul! (135–36)

The universal light of Hinduism substantiates a cosmology in which all essences necessarily ‘mingle’, to borrow one of Keats’s recurrent verbs in *Endymion*:

There hangs by unseen film, an orbéd drop
Of light, and that is love:
[...]
Melting into its radiance, we blend,
Mingle, and so become a part of it (l. 806–7, 810–11).¹⁷

As Porphyro melts and ‘blendeth’ into Madeline’s dream in ‘The Eve of St Agnes’ (320–21)

– by moonlight that succumbs to darkness – the existence of an all-pervasive light allows Coleridge to become one with Sara, ‘her living soul’ to eddy in his life and vice versa. Thus Coleridge works through his application of Hindu light to reach a metaphysical interpenetration. *Bhagavad Gita* has equipped Coleridge to translate thinking into feeling, and his inaction into a form of endeavour.

Comment [SW13]: By moonlight that quickly succumbs to darkness...

Comment [MC14]: “Yoink.”

The conclusion to ‘Dejection’ could be read as a Christian, redemptive joy. Textual influences on the poem could be traced to a great many works read by Coleridge in addition to *Bhagavad Gita*. Interpreting ‘Dejection’ as an experiment with Hindu philosophy adumbrates a playful humour, if not quite self-parody. By working through the cosmology of *Bhagavad Gita*, Coleridge extrapolates the outcome he desires: union with his addressee results from arcane reading and dedicated inaction. If this constitutes a travesty of Hinduism, it is a viable verse-experiment for an eclectic thinker. Briefly, therefore, Hinduism displays its presence in Coleridge’s poetry; evidence of the diversity of texts he consulted in search of his elusive philosophical-system. By contrast, Isherwood persisted with Hinduism; his search for light was literal and sincere. Eventually the two authors obtained comparable reputations as second fiddles to greater talents, unfulfilled writers who were side-tracked by metaphysical interests. The Bollingen edition of Coleridge’s works (1969–2002) has begun to redress the popular perception that Coleridge produced little significant work from middle age onward. Isherwood is aware that his own reputation descends in the course of *My Guru*. He cites a 1945 *Time* magazine feature that commences with an intimation of downward trajectory: ‘Ten years ago Christopher Isherwood was one of the most promising of younger English novelists’ (162). Isherwood became known as a cultist who deviated from a promising literary career. Scholars and biographers have tended to focus on Isherwood’s early works, and neglect the protracted study of Hinduism which became central to his life and influenced later works including his screenplay for *Frankenstein: The True Story* (1973).

While Isherwood endured no such melodrama as the breakdown of Coleridge’s relationship with Wordsworth, Auden was correct to anticipate that Hinduism would distance Isherwood from him. Ironically, Auden was interested in ideas that dominated Isherwood’s studies at the Vedanta Center. In the fragmentary philosophical-work ‘Hic et Ille’ (1956), Auden explores identity and existence in terms that might have occurred in *My Guru*: ‘It is

Comment [SW15]: Is it important to know about Hinduism in Isherwood’s later life for a fuller sense of the influences upon him? Does it help us to appreciate his work, as you have shown it does for a reading of Coleridge’s ‘Dejection’?

Comment [MC16]: Yes indeed – but no room to be more than allusive I fear

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impossible for me not to feel that my body is other than I, that I inhabit it like a house, and that my face is a mask which, with or without my consent, conceals my real nature from others.’¹⁸ Furthermore, in the review essay ‘Seventh Heavens’ (1957), Auden criticises any readers ‘dismissing [...] non-European religions [...] as the errors of non-white folks’, with specific reference to Hinduism (93). Nonetheless, Auden objected to the totality of Isherwood’s dedication to yoga, the Asian garb in which his ideas appeared, and especially the implicit rejection of the cultural Greek inheritance in favour of Hinduism that Isherwood clarified when he declared, ‘I’m really not knocked over by the Greeks’.¹⁹ Yet on whether Isherwood’s search for inner light was a waste of time, Auden was ambivalent. In 1951 Isherwood visited Auden in New York. ‘I showed him entries in my diary’, Isherwood writes,

Describing my life at the [...] Center. He shook his head over them, regretfully. ‘All this heathen mumbo jumbo—I’m sorry, my dear, but it just *won’t do*.’ Then, in the abrupt, dismissive tone which he used when making an unwilling admission, he added: ‘Your Swami’s quite obviously a saint, of course’ (182–83).

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¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5. Bollingen Series 75 (2 vols, Princeton, 1987), i. 541. Subsequent page numbers cited parenthetically.

² Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and his Kind* (London, 1977), 228.

³ *Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism* (2009).

⁴ While Isherwood prefers the term ‘Vedanta’, which he claims ‘is more often, but less correctly, called “Hinduism”’, Anglophone discussion has continued to favour ‘Hinduism’. See ‘Introduction’, in *Vedanta for the Western World*, ed. Christopher Isherwood (Hollywood, 1945), 1.

⁵ *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*, ed. Edward Mendelson (4 vols, London, 2002–10), ii, 385.

⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980; rept London, 2013), 41.

⁷ R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, Vol. I: The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford, 1997), 50, 106–07.

⁸ Thomas Maurice, *The History of Hindostan: Its Arts and Its Sciences* (3 vols, 1795–1820; rept New Delhi, 1973–74), i, 161.

⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1818–1819: On the History of Philosophy*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 8 (2 vols, 2000), i, 187.

¹⁰ *The Bhagvat-geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon*, trans. Charles Wilkins (London, 1785), 63.

¹¹ John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (New York, 1987), 189.

¹² *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (6 vols, Oxford, 1956–71), i, 349–50.

¹³ Natalie Tal Harries, “‘The One Life Within Us and Abroad’: Coleridge and Hinduism”, in *Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient: Cultural Negotiations* (London, 2013), 131–44, 140–41.

¹⁴ Quotations from Coleridge’s poems refer to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 (3 vols in 6 parts, Princeton, 2001), I. *Poems (Reading Text)*.

Part 1, 485.

¹⁵ In *Coleridge the Visionary* (1959), John Beer surveys light symbolism from different cultures.

¹⁶ Quoted from *Plays*, ed. David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, 2 (London, 2001) [401–42, 431](#). [Page ref may help here](#)

¹⁷ Quotations from Keats's poems refer to *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1978).

¹⁸ *Prose*, iv. 526.

¹⁹ W. I. Scobie, 'Christopher Isherwood: the art of Fiction, No. 49', *The Paris Review*, 57 (Spring 1974), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3971/the-art-of-fiction-no-49-christopher-isherwood>.