

'Kubla Khan': The Poet in the Poem

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For many readers 'Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment' (the full title is important) has offered indulgence in a magical mystery tour of exotic places and erotic imagery which, like such tours, leads nowhere. Others have found enticing symbolic equations, sometimes abandoned as unresolvable; and others again have discovered in the poem verbal clues which may be assembled in a variety of solutions, much as anagrams, puns and incomplete quotations may be made to fit into a multiple crossword puzzle. One strong tradition of readers to find the poem marvellous but meaningless begins with Lamb and Hazlitt. Lamb thought it 'irradiates and brings heaven and Elysian bowers into my parlour while he sings or says it' (the picture of Coleridge singing the poem, with or without dulcimer, has its own charm) but that it made no sense.¹ Hazlitt remarked that it proved Coleridge was one of the best writers of nonsense poems in English.² It is not far from those contemporary responses to characterizing the poem as merely the product of opium; or, indeed, as an unwritten poem. T. S. Eliot said acidly that 'faith in mystical inspiration is responsible for the exaggerated repute of *Kubla Khan*'; however its imagery sank in and then rose from Coleridge's consciousness, 'it is not *used*: the poem has not been written'.³ A recent critic has been still more contemptuous; for her, the mounting final lines are 'a total *non sequitur* . . . a small masterpiece of confidence trickery' in a poem which may well have started in the romantic habit of ballad-mongering for money, or 'piss a canto'.⁴

The solutions of other critics, following more or less Peacock's blithely confident '*simplex et unum* from first to last',⁵ have varied widely. There are attempts to travel even further down the road to Xanadu than Lowes; or, indeed, Coleridge himself. There are dark hints about race relations in the poem (it is important to Beer that

1 *Letters*, ed. E. W. Marris, 3 vols., (Cornell, 1975-8), iii, 215.

2 *Works*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols., (London, 1930-34), xix, 34.

3 *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, (London, 1970 edn.), p. 146.

4 Molly Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium*, (London, 1977), pp. 251, 258.

5 'An Essay on Fashionable Literature'; quoted George Watson, *Coleridge the Poet*, (London, 1966), p. 120.

the Abyssinian maid is white, an Isis-figure; to Fruman that she is black, and so sexually taboo).⁶ There are suggestions of Freudian involvements with Sara Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth;⁷ and of more explicit sexual identification. Thus for House, the pleasure-dome is 'breast-like, full to touch and eye, rounded and complete'; for Fruman (so scrupulous about other people's evidence) it is a *mons veneris*, and Mount Abora/Amara cognate with amor, amorous.⁸ And so on. When Coleridge eventually published the poem in 1816, apparently at Byron's prompting, he more modestly offered it 'rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits'.⁹

All of this holds cautions for criticism: not to dismiss too readily that which has no immediate coherence; not to foist upon the poem half the history of Western mythology and obsession. For Coleridge himself, the curiousness is given in his well known account of the poem's alleged automatic composition. This has been supplemented by his note on the Crewe manuscript copy of the poem, which was discovered in 1934 and is now in the British Library. (The Crewe manuscript contains interesting variants.)¹⁰ The 1816 prefatory note refers to an anodyne which brought about 'a profound sleep, *at least of the external senses*' (my italics), and the manuscript notes more directly 'a sort of Reverie, which was brought on by two grains of Opium'. Coleridge recollected composing 'two to three hundred lines, of which all but eight or ten passed away after an interruption on waking', and the manuscript describes 'this fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable'. Coleridge's published account has been questioned but no convincing reason to reject it has been put forward. For all its familiarity, it still may direct attention to a reading of the poem which sees it not as some strange sport but as related to his other major poetry and to his theoretical reflections. The account

6 J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, (London, 1970), p. 255; N. Fruman, *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel*, (London, 1972), pp. 399-400.

7 Notably by Robert Graves, in *The Meaning of Dreams*, (London, 1924), pp. 145-58. Graves is quoted, and roundly criticized, by J. L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, (Boston, 1955) Sentry edn., pp. 545-8.

8 Humphry House, *Coleridge, The Clark Lectures 1951-52*, (London, 1953), p. 118; Fruman, p. 396.

9 Coleridge, prefatory note to the poem, given in full in *Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, (London, 1954 edn.), p. 295 ff. All references to Coleridge's poetry are to this edition. References to the *Biographia Literaria* are to ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1907).

10 John Shelton, 'The Autograph Manuscript of "Kubla Khan" and an Interpretation,' *REL*, VII (1966), 32-42.

becomes, indeed, part of the poem itself, as the marginal glosses have inevitably become part of *The Ancient Mariner*.

The 'fragment' is, I think, usually taken to be the whole poem as we have it. But it is more reasonable to suppose that the famous interruption is to be understood as happening after Coleridge had set down the first part: that is, after lines 1-36 presenting Kubla's pleasure-dome and estate and encircling river, and the romantic landscape and fountain, the caverns and the sea, which lie without. The remainder of the poem is then a visionary exploration and celebration, in a landscape half a world away, of the conditions of recovery of such a creation. Indirectly it becomes an exploration of the significance of what may be recovered from the deliverances of the mind in reverie or relaxation, freed from the domination of the 'external senses'. The second part is a complete, and 'literary' passage of symbolism which values the first, necessarily incomplete part, and not a continuation of it. Thus the interruption becomes a part of the poetic structure.

Some indirect support for this view was intimated by Coleridge in a way which has not, I think, been noticed. Towards the end of the prefatory note, after explaining the effect of the interruption, he quotes lines from his own 'The Picture; or, the Lover's Resolution'.¹¹ Just before the quotation begins there is a description of the reflection of a pure maid upon a sheet of water being broken by flowers thrown upon it: 'Then all the charm Is broken — all that phantom-world so fair Vanishes . . .' But there is assurance that 'The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon The visions will return.' The image changes, however; the reflection of the maid is gone.

The state of reverie was being explored by Coleridge in a series of poems, including what are now known as the 'Conversation Poems'. These poems date from a little time before 'Kubla Khan' to a similar time after it. There are the musing projections of 'To a Friend [Charles Lamb] . . .' (1794) and 'Shurton Bars' (1795). In 'The Eolian Harp' (1795) one finds the 'phantasies . . . wild and various' which 'Traverse my indolent and passive brain'; and in 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement' (1795) is the vision of the world as God's temple, caught when 'Rests the tir'd mind, and waking loves to dream'. Such lines recall 'the profound sleep, at least of the external senses'. 'This Lime Tree Bower' (1797) substitutes for the external senses an act of imagination.

11 *Poems*, pp. 296, 372.

'Frost at Midnight' (1798) proceeds from 'the idling spirit' late at night and the sleeping infant with whom the poet is partly identified, to a vision generated by the imagination of an eternal language; such a language may be part of the concern of 'Kubla Khan'. 'The Nightingale' (1798) presents the poet as one who in reverie has surrendered his spirit to 'the influxes Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements' and been rewarded by a vision, of great precision, of restless and joyous activity. And in *Dejection: an Ode* (1802), it is because the 'how blank an eye' records so much of the world of the external senses that it cannot gain imaginative access to the fountain of 'Kubla Khan', 'the passion and the life, whose fountains are within'. In *Dejection*, the solution, the harbinger of joy, is 'gentle Sleep'.

'Kubla Khan', then, assumes its place among the poems investigating reverie. As with those poems, what reverie presents is mostly detailed and precise; and it is this that is valued by the waking consciousness. Unlike the other poems, in 'Kubla Khan' the exotic characterizes and even controls the reverie; and the waking consciousness delivers itself through visionary symbolism.

The poem opens with a clearly specified landscape; as clear as, say, that of the winding river, lawns, mountain, and abbey of 'Reflections . . .'. That poem's view, and viewpoint, derive from, or rather gently and subtly exploit, the earlier conventions of the prospect poem. In like manner, 'Kubla Khan' subsumes the conventions of the topographical and the garden poem, in the careful account of the ordered and enclosed estate with its central edifice, and the more lush but almost equally detailed evocation of untutor'd nature:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:
 Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
 Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea.
 So twice five miles of fertile ground
 With walls and towers were girdled round:
 And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
 Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
 And here were forests ancient as the hills,
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

(1-11)

In his prefatory note Coleridge acknowledges the stimulus from the seventeenth century *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, which he had been

reading just before falling asleep. The passage he was recalling describes a finely constructed garden; and there is, as Lowes has observed, a similar description of Aloadine's garden in *Purchas his Pilgrimes*. But even without knowledge of these sources (study of which has led to importing extraneous matter into the poem), let alone of the long list of analogues pursued by critics (they include Elysium and the Hesperides), the situation is clear from the language of the poem. Like an eighteenth-century gentleman landscaper, Kubla has ordered an enclosed estate. It is of some five thousand acres, its boundaries set out in stonework, its carefully selected trees and sunny gardens artfully and artificially irrigated, and its central domed palace sited to the best advantage. One might as well be in, say, the grounds of Rousham Park, or even Blenheim Palace. Except that Kubla's estate is in a remote time and a far country; and it is also, beyond the conventions it subsumes, a landscape of the poetic mind, in which art orders, or attempts to order, nature.

The 'sinuous rills' which water the park are led off from the sacred river meandering around it. The river is named from the first letters of the Greek and Hebrew alphabets, so suggesting beginnings and origins (although endings which cannot be traced or comprehended, 'caverns measureless to man', are intimated before the source is approached). Kubla's 'decree' is not enough, and does not ensure permanence.

The fountain which is the river's source springs from a 'deep romantic chasm'; a part of nature not circumscribed and ordered, not (as Pope had it) 'methodis'd', but 'holy and enchanted'; not sunny but beneath the 'waning moon'. In *Dejection*, the old or waning moon seems to be held in the new moon's arms, foretelling a new birth, a longed-for storm and tempest of life and feeling (ll. 13-20). Here, the longing is expressed by the wailing woman:

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! As holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

(12-16)

The woman is, surely, the symbol of wild nature, calling the inspired poet to a consummation, offering fecund chaos to the 'shaping spirit of imagination' so that Kubla's creation may be made possible. 'Demon' means, not devilish or evil, but that the lover-poet is

among those beings, so fascinating to the Romantic imagination, who exist between heaven and earth, with characteristics of both gods and men. (In the manuscript, the spelling is 'Daemon Lover'.) For Coleridge, in the *Biographia Literaria*, the 'reconciling', 'esemplastic', secondary imagination of the poet is analogous to the daemonic. Working upon the fragmentary deliverances of the senses, it is akin to both the perceptual gestalt which shapes the sensed world to meaning (the primary imagination), and to the 'great I AM' which makes that world possible through an infinite act of continuous creation.

It is, then, wholly appropriate that the longing call for union should be uttered beside the fountain which springs from the romantic depths:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

(17-24)

At the same time, the fountain suggests the positive power which may well up uncontrollably from the depths of romantic being to become the psychically sacred river, from which the irrigating 'sinuous rills' are led off; and the fragments of psychic matter which are absorbed and shaped by the poet. The interwoven image is of the physical intensity of ejaculation; the psychic matter is both wild like romantic nature ('rebounding hail', 'dancing rocks') and potent ('chaffy grain' being threshed implies seed, semen). The fountain is both within and without. As Coleridge wrote, in a famous letter, 'a Poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined & unified*, with the great appearances in Nature & not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal similies'.¹² In *Dejection* (ll. 45-6) the fountain is almost completely internalized. The 'outward forms' (such as Kubla's estate) derive from 'the passion and the life, whose fountains are within'. But with either emphasis the fountain is not, what Beer has insisted, indicative of destruction or ruin.¹³

12 *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols., (Oxford, 1956-71), ii, 864.

13 Beer, pp. 231-2, 236.

It is then the union of nature (which is also the psychic material) and poet, of woman and lover, which presides over the source of original power and enables the formal realization of art.

The river proceeds from the 'turmoil' of its birth to the 'tumult' of its mysterious end. That on its way it makes possible the work of art is given by the mannered, almost obtrusive alliteration of the first line following (so different from the last):

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
 Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
 Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
 And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
 And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
 Ancestral voices prophesying war!

(26-30)

The shade of meaning between 'turmoil' and 'tumult', the former signifying a confusion of things, the latter a commotion of voices, the one before and the other after the work of art, is relevant. The disordered voices of the past suggest works which have not survived, with the implication that poet and audience have not been at one. Counterbalancing this suggestion, though, is a silent image of continuity; for the fountain will be fed, ultimately, from the waters of the 'lifeless ocean'.

While the work survives, however, it is not merely ornamental; Kubla may have intended only this, but he is not the creator:

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
 Floated midway on the waves;
 Where was heard the mingled measure
 From the fountain and the caves.
 It was a miracle of rare device,
 A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

(31-6)

As the river of beginnings makes art possible, so art reflects order upon its passing life. As it does so it is also in a relationship with death (assuming that the 'caves of ice' are the 'measureless caverns'). Life and death are brought into a 'mingled measure', a harmony. The meaning here is difficult, and fundamental; the work of art which has been made possible can relate the two limits of existence, ocean and fountain.

It is relevant detail that at this point a consciously 'literary' diction is again used. 'Shadow' means 'reflection'; 'waves' ('Wave' in the

manuscript) means simply the surface of the water (an undulating surface would not give an apparently floating reflection).

The dream is now broken (the famous interruption); and this has its own structural point, for it has already been suggested that art is not eternal and indestructible. It is, rather, subject to the consciousness of its creator; as, Coleridge came to believe, the world is sustained in being by the consciousness of the Creator. The poem turns from the reverie to the self who has sustained it. For the first time, 'I' appears, to recall wakefully another and quite different vision:

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.

(37-41)

The maid's skin colour is irrelevant. That she is Abyssinian means she recalls that part of the east held to be the seat of the oldest of civilizations and possibly the place of the origin of language. The pursuit of an ultimate or original language was a scholarly concern of the period. In different ways, such a language was the quest not only of Coleridge but of Wordsworth and Shelley too. (Wordsworth found that language articulated for poetry by nature's great appearances. Shelley sent his poet in *Alastor* to 'dark Ethiopia' to discover 'strong inspiration' and 'The thrilling secrets of the birth of time'.) The dulcimer, or sambucca, was thought to have been invented by the cave-dwellers of Abyssinia, and to be the female equivalent of Apollo's lyre.¹⁴ The original language, then, may be poetry.

Mount Abora is certainly a version of Mount Amara, in Abyssinia. In the manuscript Coleridge wrote either Amora or Amara, correcting the one to the other by over-writing and probably the former to the latter.¹⁵ Why he changed the spelling is not known;¹⁶ but he would have known Mount Amara from *Paradise Lost*:

Nor where Abassin kings their issue guard,
Mount Amara, though this by some supposed
True Paradise under the Ethiop line

(IV, 280-2)

14 Beer, pp. 50, 63-4, 253-4.

15 Shelton, p. 33, and Fruman, pp. 342, 540.

16 Beer, p. 256, suggests an attempt to assimilate 'Bethabara' from *Paradise Regained*, I, 184 and II, 20.

For Milton, Mount Amara is one of four possible Paradises which are compared to the true Paradise. It was said by one of Milton's contemporaries to be blessed with 'such ravishing pleasures of all sorts, that some have taken (but mistaken) it for the true Paradise'.¹⁷ Thus Mount Amara bears a relationship to Kubla's estate, and a relationship to the true Paradise which is comparable to that between the imaginative creation of the poet and that of the Creator. It is the poet's creation which may be revived:

Could I revive within me
 Her symphony and 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 caves of ice!
 And all who heard should see them there . . .
(42-8)

The harmony of 'symphony and song' recalls the 'miracle' of the reflection of the dome upon the river, and the 'mingled measure' of fountain and caves. The echoing is pointed up visually, if need be, by the indentation in both printed text and manuscript of the relevant lines. So the poet may declare, with more force than Kubla's 'decree', that the original vision could be rebuilt; and perhaps completed, for paradises are of their nature complete. The condition of rebuilding is 'deep delight'. In *Dejection* (ll. 64-6) this 'beautiful and beauty-making power' is Joy, 'Life's effluence'.

The 'Could' of line 42 has been much argued, following different readings of the poem. 'If only I could, but I cannot' goes with the view that the poem expresses finally the failure of the imagination,¹⁸ perhaps comparable to the despair of *Dejection*. 'If I could, and I can and I shall', is surely the meaning. As House argues, the marvellous control and the mounting joy of the closing lines must make this clear.¹⁹ Yet in the closing lines, the first person pronoun shifts to the third person:

And all who heard should see them there,
 And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
 Weave a circle round him thrice,

17 Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie in Four Bookes*, 1652, quoted in *Paradise Lost*, ed. A. Fowler, (London, 1968), pp. 211-2.

18 G. Yarlott, *Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid*, (London, 1967), p. 147.

19 House, pp. 115-16.

And close your eyes with holy dread,
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,
 And drunk the milk of Paradise.

(48-54)

The change of pronoun serves two purposes. First, it suggests that the poet of the poem, the 'I', is absorbed into the archetypal figure. The lines draw together a number of Romantic and pre-Romantic conceptions of the Poet's partial assumption of divinity. Druidic, Orphic, and Bacchic models have been investigated, although probably the chief source is in Plato's dialogues. (In the *Ion* dialogue the transported poets draw honey and milk out of the springs and fountains.)²⁰ Secondly the change of pronoun allows for the closer association of this figure with the Daemon Lover of the first part of the poem; both are seen, or are to be seen as, existing between heaven and earth. In a similar way, the Abyssinian maid who sings and plays is to be associated with the wailing woman beside the fountain. The first pairing in the romantic wild celebrates that which makes possible the ordered, if threatened and impermanent, work of art of the dream. The later conjunction between poet and maid, and what she implies, realizes such a work for 'All', in and through the poem itself. This will only come about, though, so long as the figure of the poet is recognized. The significance of the closing lines lies as much in the attitude enjoined on readers of poetry as in the details of the rituals. To honour the poet in these ancient ways is to prevent war. To see him as daemonic becomes an important part of 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith'.²¹

20 Quoted by Beer, pp. 259-60, from a translation of 1759, following Elisabeth Schneider.

21 *Biographia Literaria*, ii. 6.