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## Summary: The Poem

“Kubla Khan,” one of the most famous and most analyzed English poems, is a fifty-four-line lyric in three verse paragraphs. In the opening paragraph, the title character decrees that a “stately pleasure-dome” be built in Xanadu. Although numerous commentators have striven to find sources for the place names used here by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, there is no critical consensus about the origins or meanings of these names. The real-life Kubla Khan, a thirteenth century Mongolian general and statesman who conquered and unified China, lived in an elaborate residence known as K’ai-p’ing, or Shang-tu, in southeastern Mongolia. Coleridge’s Kubla has his palace constructed where Alph, “the sacred river,” begins its journey to the sea. The construction of the palace on “twice five miles of fertile ground” is described. It is surrounded by walls and towers within which are ancient forests and ornate gardens “bright with sinuous rills.”

Xanadu is described more romantically in the second stanza. It becomes “A savage place! as holy and enchanted/ As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted/ By woman wailing for her demon-lover!” It is inhabited not by Kubla’s family and followers, but by images from Coleridge’s imagination. His Xanadu is a magical place where the unusual is to be expected, as when a “mighty fountain” bursts from the earth, sending “dancing rocks” into the air, followed by the sacred river itself. The poem has thus progressed from the creations of Kubla Khan to the even more magical actions of nature. The river meanders for five miles until it reaches “caverns measureless to man” and sinks “in tumult to a lifeless ocean.”

This intricate description is interrupted briefly when Kubla hears “from far/ Ancestral voices prophesying war!” This may be an allusion to the opposition of the real Khan by his younger brother, Arigböge, which led eventually to a military victory for Kubla. Coleridge then shifts the focus back to the pleasure-dome, with its shadow floating on the waves of the river: “It was a miracle of rare device,/ A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”

The final paragraph presents a first-person narrator who recounts a vision he once had of an Abyssinian maid playing a dulcimer and singing of Mount Abora. The narrator says that if he could revive her music within himself, he would build a pleasure-dome, and all who would see it would be frightened of “his flashing eyes, his floating hair!” His observers would close their eyes “with holy dread,/ For he on honey-dew hath fed,/ And drunk the milk of Paradise.”

Coleridge prefaces the poem with an explanation of how what he calls a “psychological curiosity” came to be published. According to Coleridge, he was living in ill health during the summer of 1797 in a “lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire.” Having taken an “anodyne,” he fell asleep immediately upon reading in a seventeenth century travel book by Samuel Purchas: “Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.” He claims that while sleeping for three hours he composed

two-hundred to three-hundred lines, “if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort.”

When Coleridge awoke, he remembered the entire poem and set about copying it down, only to be interrupted for an hour “by a person on business from Porlock.” Returning to the poem, Coleridge could recall only “some eight or ten scattered lines and images.” He claims he has since intended to finish “Kubla Khan” but has not yet been able to.

## Summary

“Kubla Khan,” tagged as a fragment, has two parts. The first is a mostly prose introduction in which Coleridge recounts the circumstances under which he composed the following lines of verse. He confesses to having fallen asleep after taking medication for a minor complaint while meditating upon a voluminous travelogue. Asleep, he dreams the images that, upon waking, he dashes down as the poem. Unfortunately, he is interrupted by a man from Porlock, a nearby town, and when he is again able to write, he recalls little more. Additionally, Coleridge announces that he is publishing this fragment, written years before, only at the behest of the deservedly famous (as he ingenuously notes) Lord Byron. Thus, in short order, Coleridge blames a book, sleep and dreams, drugs, a visitor, and Byron for this curious and cryptic poem rather than bravely taking responsibility for it himself.

Coleridge’s insecurities prevented his claiming a masterpiece. The poem proper is also bipartite. Its first section describes how, godlike, Kubla Khan creates an entire world, a kind of Eden, merely by utterance. His decree animates a world of fountains and rivers, caves and gardens, energy and peace, an enchanted and hallowed place that seems to represent the origins of life, consciousness, and art. Within this Eden, conflict, a fall, is predicted, for the emperor hears ancient war prophecies.

Abruptly, the poem switches to a dream of an Abyssinian dulcimer-playing maiden singing of a holy mountain. The poet declares that, were he able to recall her song, which in a way he has just done with lines that evoke her, he would also be able to duplicate Kubla Khan’s invention, which he has actually also just done in writing the foregoing, and his witnesses would attest to his inspiration, his art, and his prophecy.

What Coleridge has done is to celebrate his poetic artistry and its kinship with the creative and prophetic powers of religion and humanity’s deepest desires.

## Themes: Themes and Meanings

Much of the commentary on “Kubla Khan” has focused on the influence of Coleridge’s addiction to opium, on its dreamlike qualities, the “anodyne” he refers to in his preface, but no conclusive connection between the two can be proved. Considerable criticism has also dealt with whether the poem is truly, as Coleridge claimed, a fragment of a spontaneous creation. The poet’s account of the unusual origin of his poem is probably only one of numerous instances in which one of the Romantic poets proclaimed the spontaneity or naturalness of their art. Most critics of “Kubla Khan” believe that its language and meter are too intricate for it to have been created by the fevered mind of a sleeping poet. Others say that its ending is too fitting for the poem to be a fragment.

Other contentions about “Kubla Khan” revolve around its meanings (or lack thereof). Some critics, including T. S. Eliot in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), have claimed the poem has no veritable meaning. Such analysts say its method and meaning are inseparable: The poem’s form is its only meaning. For other commentators, “Kubla Khan” is clearly an allegory about the creation of art. As the artist decided to

create his work of art, so does Kubla Khan decide to have his pleasure-dome constructed. The poem's structure refutes Coleridge's claim about its origins, since the first thirty-six lines describe what Kubla has ordered built, and the last eighteen lines deal with the narrator's desire to approximate the creation of the pleasure-dome.

Xanadu is an example of humanity imposing its will upon nature to create a vision of paradise, since the palace is surrounded by an elaborate park. That the forests are "ancient as the hills" makes the imposing of order upon them more of a challenge. Like a work of art, Xanadu results from an act of inspiration and is a "holy and enchanted" place. Within this man-decreed creation are natural creations such as the river that bursts from the earth. The origin of Alph is depicted almost in sexual terms, with the earth breathing "in fast thick pants" before ejaculating the river, a "mighty fountain," in an explosion of rocks. The sexual imagery helps reinforce the creation theme of "Kubla Khan."

Like Kubla's pleasure-dome, a work of art is a "miracle of rare device," and the last paragraph of the poem depicts the narrator's desire to emulate Kubla's act through music. As with Kubla, the narrator wants to impose order on a tumultuous world. Like Xanadu, art offers a refuge from the chaos. The narrator, as with a poet, is inspired by a muse, the Abyssinian maid, and wants to re-create her song. The resulting music would be the equivalent "in air" of the pleasure-dome. As an artist, the narrator would then stand apart from a society that fears those who create, those who have "drunk the milk of Paradise."

## **Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism): Introduction**

### **"Kubla Khan" Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

The following entry presents criticism of Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" (1816). See also, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner Criticism" and *Lyrical Ballads Criticism*.

Along with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) and "Christabel" (1816), "Kubla Khan" (1816) has been widely acclaimed as one of Coleridge's most significant works. While Coleridge himself referred to "Kubla Khan" as a fragment, the vivid images contained in the work have garnered extensive critical attention through the years, and it has long been acknowledged as a poetic representation of Coleridge's theories of the imagination and creation. Although it was not published until 1816, scholars agree that the work was composed between 1797 and 1800. At the time of its publication, Coleridge subtitled it "A Vision in A Dream: A Fragment," and added a prefatory note explaining the unusual origin of the work. The poet explained that after taking some opium for medication, he grew drowsy while reading a passage about the court of Kubla Khan from Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimage*. In this dreamlike state, Coleridge related, he composed a few hundred lines of poetry and when he awoke, immediately began writing the verses down. Unfortunately, a visitor interrupted him, and when the poet had a chance to return to his writing, the images had fled, leaving him with only vague recollections and the remaining 54 lines of this fragmentary poem. Although many critics have since challenged Coleridge's version of the poem's composition, critical scholarship on the work has focused equally on its fragmentary nature and on its place in Romantic writing as a representative work of poetic theory.

### **Plot and Major Characters**

The poem begins with a description of a magnificent palace built by Mongolian ruler Kubla Khan during the thirteenth century. The "pleasure dome" described in the first few lines of the poem is reflective of Kubla's power, and the description of the palace and its surroundings also help convey the character and nature of Kubla, the poem's main character. In contrast to the palace and its planned gardens, the space outside Kubla's

domain is characterized by ancient forests and rivers, providing a majestic backdrop to Kubla's creation. It initially appears that there is harmony between the two worlds, but the narrator then describes a deep crack in the earth, hidden under a grove of dense trees. The tenor of the poem then changes from the sense of calm and balance described in the first few lines, to an uneasy sense of the pagan and the supernatural. There is a vast distance between the ordered world of Kubla's palace and this wild, untamed place, the source of the fountain that feeds the river flowing through the rocks, forests, and ultimately, the stately garden of Kubla Khan. As the river moves from the deep, uncontrolled chasm described in earlier lines back to Kubla's world, the narrative shifts from third person to first person; the poet then describes his own vision and his own sense of power that comes from successful poetic creation.

## Major Themes

Despite the controversy surrounding the origin of "Kubla Khan," most critics acknowledge that the images, motifs and ideas explored in the work are representative of Romantic poetry. The emphasis on the Oriental setting of "Kubla Khan" in contrast to the description of the sacred world of the river is interpreted by critics as commonplace understanding of orthodox Christianity at the turn of the century, when the Orient was seen as the initial step towards Western Christianity. Also typical of other Romantic poems is Coleridge's lyrical representation of the landscape, which is both the source and keeper of the poetic imagination. Detailed readings of "Kubla Khan" indicate the use of intricate metric and poetic devices in the work. Coleridge himself explained that while any work with rhyme and rhythm may be described as a poem, for the work to be "legitimate" each part must mutually support and enhance the other, coming together as a harmonious whole. In "Kubla Khan" he uses this complex rhyming structure to guide the reader through its themes—the ordered rhymes of the first half describe the ordered world of Kubla Khan, while the abrupt change in meter and rhyme immediately following, describe the nature around Kubla Khan—the world that he cannot control. This pattern and contrast between worlds continues through the poem, and the conflict is reflected in the way Coleridge uses rhythm and order in his poem. Critics agree that "Kubla Khan" is a complex work with purpose and structure, and that it is representative of Coleridge's poetic ideal of a harmonious blend of meaning and form, resulting in a "graceful and intelligent whole."

## Critical Reception

When Coleridge first issued "Kubla Khan" in 1816, it is believed that he did so for financial reasons and as an appendage to the more substantial "Christabel." The work had previously been excluded by Wordsworth from the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* and there is little evidence that Coleridge himself claimed it as one of his more significant works. In fact, when first published, many contemporary reviewers regarded the poem as "nonsense," especially because of its fragmentary nature. In the years since, the poem, as well as the story of its creation, has been widely analyzed by critics, and much critical scholarship has focused on the sources for this work as well as the images included in it. Recent studies of the poem have explored the fragmentary nature of the poem versus the harmonious vision of poetic theory it proposes. For example, in an essay analyzing the fragmentary nature of "Kubla Khan," Timothy Bahti proposes that the poet uses the symbol of the chasm to represent the act of creation, and that the struggle between the fragment and division that generates the sacred river is representative of the act of creative continuity. Other critics have focused on "Kubla Khan" as a poem that relates the account of its own creation, thus stressing its importance as a work that defines Coleridge's theories of poetic creation. It is now widely acknowledged that "Kubla Khan" is a technically complex poem that reflects many of its creator's poetic and creative philosophies and that the thematic repetition, the intricate rhymes, and carefully juxtaposed images in the work come together as a harmonious whole that is representative of Coleridge's ideas of poetic creation.

# Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism): Principal Works

*The Fall of Robespierre. An Historic Drama* [act 1 by Coleridge, acts 2 and 3 by Robert Southey] (play) 1794

*A Moral and Political Lecture, Delivered at Bristol* (essay) 1795

*Conciones ad Populum. Or Addresses to the People* (lectures) 1795

*Poems on Various Subjects* [with Charles Lamb and Robert Southey] (poetry) 1796

*Fears in Solitude, Written in 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion. To Which are Added, France, an Ode; and Frost at Midnight* (poetry) 1798

*Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* [with William Wordsworth] (poetry) 1798

*Remorse. A Tragedy, In Five Acts* [prologue by Charles Lamb] (play) 1813

*Christabel: Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep* (poetry) 1816

*Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* 2 vols. (prose) 1817

*Sibylline Leaves: A Collection of Poems* (poetry) 1817

*The Poetical Works of S. T. Coleridge Including the Dramas of Wallenstein Remorse, and Zapolya* 3 vols. (poetry and plays) 1828

## Criticism: Paul Magnuson (essay date 1974)

SOURCE: “‘Kubla Khan’: That Phantom-World So Fair” in *Critical Essays on Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Leonard Orr, G. K. Hall, 1994, pp. 71-80.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1974, Magnuson theorizes that “Kubla Khan” shares many themes and images with Coleridge’s “conversation poems.”]

Coleridge’s Fame as a poet rests on the achievement of the mystery poems, “Kubla Khan,” “The Ancient Mariner,” and “Christabel.” The Conversation Poems, if they are known to a general audience, are regarded uncritically as minor efforts in a mode more properly Wordsworthian, even though they precede “Tintern Abbey” and clearly stand as a paradigm that Wordsworth varies. At first sight the easy conversational middle style and the presence of other persons seem quite different from the more pronounced artfulness and solitary vision of “Kubla Khan.”

Although it appears to be the creation of an entirely different poet, “Kubla Khan” repeats several motifs of the Conversation Poems. It explores the relationship between the strength of the human imagination and the impulses with which it must work. In “This Lime-Tree Bower” the mind’s creations liberate Coleridge from the state of mind in which he is incapable of responding to the immediate experience of nature and permit him to return to Poole’s garden to verify his imagination. Imagination and nature in the garden are substantially the same. The images of the mind and the sensations from without are literally interchangeable. “Kubla Khan” further tests the imagination’s validity. The order of the imagination depicted in the opening lines is united

with the vitality of the garden, but, as in other, less optimistic Conversation Poems, the imaginative order is lost. At best there is a balance between the Kubla's creation of the dome with its surrounding walls and the fertility of the river. Containment and control of the inspirational force are not sustained, because the dome vibrates on the surface of the river; the delightful dream is lost because order cannot be maintained. The final lines, though not a recantation as in the earlier Conversation Poems, still distance Coleridge from the vision, a distancing that anticipates the later distancing in "Frost at Midnight" and "The Nightingale."<sup>1</sup> Coleridge is removed from the intensity of the vision in "Kubla Khan," just as he was suspicious of his speculations in the earlier poems, and for the same reasons.

An explanation of how the delightful dream was lost is presented in the Preface. Whether "Kubla Khan" was in fact composed during an opium dream has been questioned, and the man from Porlock has long ago been dismissed as a Coleridgean attempt to belittle his own accomplishment and to make excuses for not satisfying his readers' expectations. But the Preface need not be accepted or rejected on the grounds of its literal truth; it can be taken seriously as Coleridge's attempt to explain one process of poetic creation and the inadequacies of that process which led to an inevitable loss. Both the Preface and the poem have creativity as their subjects; both trace, not only the creative process, but also the loss of creativity. Creation in this instance began when Coleridge had before him the objective reality of the sentence from Purchas: "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall."<sup>2</sup> When Coleridge fell asleep, Purchas's words were transformed into visual imagery. The sleep itself was profound, "at least of the external senses," one in which the immediate surroundings were obscured but one in which the mind was still active. Images came to him "as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort." The images appeared to be substantial realities, for he had no frame of reference that would prove them otherwise. Additionally, the sequence in which the images arose was an involuntary one.

That "Kubla Khan" was composed in a reverie is doubtful. To see the conscious art in the poem, we do not need Wordsworth's reminder that Coleridge was "quite an epicure in sound" and "that when he was intent on a new experiment in metre, the time and labour he bestowed were inconceivable."<sup>3</sup> Whether or not there ever was a man from Porlock, the vision that was held so firmly in the dream was lost soon after awakening. The rest of the vision "passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast." The images that were apprehended vividly as things became insubstantial shadows that faded into nothingness, because, as Coleridge shows in the poem, the images were projected upon a medium which momentarily constituted their reality but which also proved they were nothing. To illustrate this loss, Coleridge added lines from "The Picture" to the Preface:

Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair  
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,  
And each mis-shape[s] the other. Stay awhile,  
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes—  
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon  
The visions will return! And lo, he stays,  
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms  
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more  
The pool becomes a mirror.

[*The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, hereafter cited as *PW*, I, 296]

But unlike the image of the lover in "The Picture," there was no "after restoration" of the images from his dream. That Coleridge, in his later years, and after his own sense of loss of poetic powers, could affix these lines to the Preface and dismiss the poem as a "psychological curiosity" indicate that he came to view it suspiciously. Just as the images of the dream were lost by interruption and because of their inherent unreality, the vision contained in the lines immediately written down was lost. The man from Porlock was a frequent

visitor.

The poem opens abruptly with a picture of the dome. Coleridge dispenses with the frame that traditionally opens the conventional dream vision, such as the description of the poet's walking out on a May morning and falling asleep. The abruptness of the opening is effective, for the picture of the dome is not filtered through the hazy eyes of a dreamer. It is seen directly, and it is real. The Khan creates his paradise by decree, by willing it into being, a type of divine creation. Coleridge does not mention the building of the walls, towers, and dome as though they were built by a laborious human effort. The pleasure dome comes into being because the Khan has uttered the decree, the words of creation, and as the words are spoken the grounds are circumscribed. The pleasure of the gardens is not in the sensual indulgences permitted there, which are simply not mentioned in the poem, but in the joy, the deep delight of creation itself. The words of creation are immediately transformed into things, real objects, just as Purchas's words rose before Coleridge as things, but, of course, the Khan's creation is willed.<sup>4</sup> The garden itself is an enclosed space in which it at first appears that all nature is tempered and controlled by human art. The Khan is an artist who has imposed solid architectural order upon the spontaneous garden. The whole enclosed space is a projection of the Khan's artistic imagination and an assertion of his essential individuality. The dome constitutes the center of the fruitfully limited field of consciousness; in this spot restriction and exclusion constitute a definition of the self and are in contrast to the deadness of imprisonment at the beginning of some of the Conversation Poems.<sup>5</sup>

But to the poet who apprehends the delightful dream, the image of the pleasure dome is a precarious one; its apparent permanence is as chimerical as the reflection of the image on the stream. The original order of the gardens is created by the balancing of antithetical forces: the artificial construction of the pleasure dome with its walls and the naturally disruptive forces of the river.<sup>6</sup> The initial vision of the pleasure grounds, which at first comprises both the order of the dome and the generative water, is held in the imagination. The pleasure dome at the center, with the source of the river on the one side and the "caverns measureless to man" on the other, is the central work that dominates and unifies the gardens. Its delight is its fertility, its blossoming and incense-bearing trees and sunny spots of greenery that are nurtured by the sacred river.

The river is sacred because it is the true source of generation and life. In Coleridge's notebook, four entries after the often-cited source in Maurice's *History of Hindostan* for the "caves of ice" passage are several that concern water symbolism. As Lowes suggests, Coleridge may at this time have been looking for material for his projected hymns to the sun, moon, and the four elements.<sup>7</sup> The first cryptic note reads "Water—Thales.—" (*NB [Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge]*, I, 244). Coleridge may have been informed about Thales by Aristotle, who, in the *Metaphysics*, wrote that Thales believed the first cause is "water (for which reason he declared that the earth rests on water), getting the notion perhaps from seeing that the nutriment of all things is moist, and that heat itself is generated from the moist and kept alive by it."<sup>8</sup>

Coburn suggests some possible sources for entry 244 but does not mention Aristotle himself. The entries that follow in the notebook quote from the *Metaphysics* passages that are located quite near Aristotle's explanation of Thales' belief in the first cause, but Coburn points out that they are taken from Cudworth's *True Intellectual System*. What makes it tempting to speculate that Coleridge read the passage from Aristotle is Aristotle's statement that Thales believed that the earth rests on water. This idea corresponds with a similar one Lowes found in his reading of travel literature Coleridge used as a mine for his imagery. For instance, in Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790) Coleridge read of the fountains along the Nile:

The second fountain lies about a stone-cast west from the first: the inhabitants say that *this whole mountain is full of water*, and add, that the whole plain about the fountain is floating and unsteady, a certain mark that there is water concealed under it; for which reason, the water does not overflow at the fountain, but *forces itself with great violence out* at the foot of the mountain. The inhabitants ... maintain that that year it trembled little on account of the drought, but other years, that *it trembled and overflowed so as that it could scarce be*

*approached without danger.*<sup>9</sup>

And in Bernier's *Voyage to Surat* Coleridge read: "I left my way again, to approach a great lake, which I saw afar off, through the middle whereof passeth the river that runs to Baramoulay. ... In the midst of this lake there is an eremitage with its little garden, which, as they say, *doth miraculously float upon the water.*"<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Coleridge associated these statements of the land's being supported by and floating on water with the quotation from the *Metaphysics*. All of them may be reflected in the cryptic notation about Thales. The images certainly were in his reading, but the significance he gives them is his own.

Whether or not Coleridge made such associations, the notebook entries which follow that on Thales continue the theme of generation. Two entries later Coleridge copied from Cudworth a passage from the *Metaphysics* which follows that in which Aristotle explains the belief in the primacy of water. Some believed "the Ocean and Tethys to have been the original of generation: and for this cause the oath of the gods is said to be by water (called by the poets Styx) as being that from which they all derived their original. For an oath ought to be by that which is most honourable; and that which is most ancient is most honourable" (*NB*, I, 246n). The allusion to those who thought that Ocean and Tethys were "the original of generation" is specifically to Homer's line "The father of all gods the ocean is, Tethys their mother," which in the original Greek constitutes entry 247. The hymns were never written, but the annotations indicate that if they were, water would have been praised as the force of generation, the most ancient and venerable of the gods. Perhaps, also, Coleridge did not write the poems because he had already used the material in "Kubla Khan" and "The Ancient Mariner."

The fountain from which the river flows is described in terms of human sexuality and generation:

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!  
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momently was forced:  
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
Hugh 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 momently the sacred river.

[ll. 12-24]

Unlike the Khan's creation by decree, instantaneous and so out of time, this creation is continuous in time, one that is accompanied by the pains and tumult of human birth. The fecundity of earth is echoed later in Coleridge's adaptation of Stolberg's *Hymne an die Erde*: "Earth! thou mother of numberless children, the nurse and the mother. ..." The metric regularity of the first eleven lines of "Kubla Khan" is broken into the irregularity of lines twelve to twenty to convey the physical sensation of labored effort. Many of the lines have feminine rhyme, and at significant points spondees are substituted for iambs: "with ceaseless turmoil seething" and "in fast thick pants were breathing." A prefatory note to "Hymn to the Earth" discusses the difficulty of writing hexameters in English because of the paucity of true spondees. As an example of one of the few in English, Coleridge cites *turmoil*, a further echo of "Kubla Khan."

The river also has a further significance. It represents the sources of the unconscious. Both its origin and destination are unknowable and are common symbols for the unconscious. The explosive force with which the river erupts into the serenity of the garden from an unknown source and, after flowing at random, returns



“through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea” indicates that while it provides the essential fertility, it also threatens tranquillity and order. Within the garden it meanders at its own will until it cascades “in tumult to a lifeless ocean.” These random movements are quite similar to those implied in Coleridge's consistent references to the random flow of images through his mind. The illustration of the imagination by the figure of the water insect that is both active and passive (*BL*, [*Biographia Literaria*], I, 85-86) pertains to the relationship of the active mind to the flow of images. The water provides the materials upon which the imagination must work, materials which, while they are necessary to fertility and generation, are also potentially dangerous if they are not properly controlled. Coleridge is beginning to realize the inimical influence of an irresistible force working upon him, and he is beginning to understand that that irresistible force which he had formerly called the One Life may originate in unfathomable depths of his own mind.

Having described the origin and ultimate destination of the river, Coleridge returns to the dome itself, which has assumed a different appearance:

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.

[II. 31-36]

In the first printed edition of the poem in 1816, these lines are separated from the previous verse paragraph.<sup>11</sup> The shortened lines and the reestablished metrical regularity recall the regularity of the first seven lines, in which the stable creation is first presented. But the stability is not completely restored. It is difficult to know exactly how to visualize the image of the dome. It may be that we are to see the dome itself in the midst of the river upon a floating island as described by Bernier. But it is the “shadow” of the dome that floats on the waves, apparently not the dome itself. The word *shadow* may here refer to an image or reflection of the dome, for the whole scene is a “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice.”<sup>12</sup> In the light of the prefatory quotation from “The Picture,” the second reading is the better one. The caves of ice themselves may be either under the dome itself or in the river. Earlier in the poem the caverns are located at the point at which the river drops into the “sunless sea.” However one visualizes the image, the balance between the dome and the river is so precarious that it is difficult to speak of it as a reconciliation of opposites. The miracle is that there is such a delicate balance, one that is threatened at every moment. Because of the turbulence of the river, there is no permanent solidity. The “mingled measure” that is heard comes from the “ceaseless turmoil” of the fountain, where the woman wails for her demon lover, and from the river's falling into the sunless sea from which Kubla heard voices “prophesying war.”

Order and harmony are threatened by the power of the river. The dome is apprehended as a mere vibrating shadow, not a “thing,” as Coleridge used the word in the Preface; previously it had been a solid reality. As an image its existence is rendered unstable by the very material upon which it is projected, the water which sustains it momentarily but which eventually dissolves it. If the lines from “The Picture” are an accurate description of the loss of vision, then the existence of the image on the water, and indeed the entire poem, is merely momentary. The vision fails, then, not primarily because the poet is limited in his powers to perceive a transcendental reality, but because the materials that compose the vision are inherently unstable.

If we are to take seriously Coleridge's declaration that the poem as we have it was conceived in his dream and transcribed immediately after awakening, then the final eighteen lines originally comprised a part of that vision. In such a view the poem is the fragmentary beginning of a much longer poem that was lost at the point Coleridge was invoking the Abyssinian maid as he would a muse. But a more sensible view is that the last lines are a commentary upon his inability to continue the first thirty-six line vision of the dome and to regard

the Preface as misleading on this point. The first two lines in the final verse paragraph refer to a vision prior to the opium dream: "A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw. ..." The subtitle, "A Vision in a Dream," refers most directly to the vision of the dome itself, and although there are symbolic similarities between the two, they are distinct.

Coleridge says that he "would build that dome in air, / That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!" if only he could revive within himself the song of the Abyssinian maid. If he could revive the song, he could restore the certainty of vision that he initially imaged the Khan possessing, a certainty that the images of the dream constituted a reality. Thus equipped, he could continue to write prophetic poetry and would become the inspired poet of the final lines. But the voice in the last eighteen lines is subjunctive, and the statement hypothetical; he cannot revive the song. The poetic visions after "Kubla Khan," "The Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel," possess their solidity in the central images, but ironically the dreams reveal symbols of evil, not of deep delight.

To renew the dream would indeed be a deep delight for Coleridge—yet it is not renewed, nor does the hypothetical tone of the last lines indicate that Coleridge will try to recover it. Structurally, this presentation of the lost dream resembles some of the Conversation Poems. The endings of both the Conversation Poems and "Kubla Khan" qualify the aspirations expressed in the earlier sections and suggest the problems of fulfilling the promise of vision. Certainly "Kubla Khan" does not explicitly disavow the airy speculations as "The Eolian Harp" does, nor is there a veiled withdrawal so that others may realize the expectations as in "Frost at Midnight." Coleridge's inability to retain the vision does not come from any fear that the pleasure dome is morally inadequate as was retirement in "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement." Even though Purchas describes the pleasure gardens as the construction of an Oriental despot who selfishly builds a palace of sensual pleasure, the poem itself does not emphasize those qualities. The dome is stately, and the word *pleasure*, which is constantly used in conjunction with the dome, refers to the delight of poetic creativity.

Coleridge cannot recapture the dome because he lacks the "symphony and song" of the Abyssinian maid, the necessary prerequisite for attaining the vision. When he laments the loss of his imagination in "Dejection," he explains that the loss of joy had dried up the sources of vitality and likens joy to "this strong music in the soul" (l. 60). Yet music was for him not always emblematic of spontaneous, natural joy. "Music is the most entirely human of the fine arts," he wrote in "On Poesy or Art," "and has the fewest *analogia* in nature" (*BL*, II, 261). He must regain the conscious and deliberately artful control to counteract the inspirational turmoil that comes from the fountain and the caves and must further harmonize the "mingled measure" the Khan hears. The presence of the Abyssinian maid invites comparison of her with the "woman wailing for her demon-lover." If the maid's song represents the imaginative order that is a precondition of art and vision, then she is contrasted with the woman wailing in uncontrolled passion and desire. Even so the exotic qualities of the maid also type her as a symbol of inspiration, a characteristic that is emphasized, not in Coleridge's picture of her, but in the portrait of someone inspired by her:

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

## [II. 48-54]

The figure of the frenzied poet is at least as old as Plato's *Ion*, in which Ion delivers his lines without conscious understanding of their meaning. To become such a poet would necessitate a surrender to the powerful flow of inspiration represented by the river. Thus although the maid seems to embody the same

balance of artful control and vital inspiration as in the dome and gardens in the first stanza, Coleridge is wary of her because he fears the effect of inspiration upon him. In "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement," Coleridge rejected a false paradise in hopes of gaining a truer one; here he stands back from the Abyssinian paradise that is the gateway to another, more delightful vision.

Looking through that gateway and thinking what his creation would be like were he to enter, Coleridge believes that his would be a "dome in air" which would depend upon his song for its continued existence. He wrote to Poole from Germany that he "could half suspect that what are deemed fine descriptions, produce their effects almost purely by a charm of words, with which & with whose combinations, we associate *feelings* indeed, but no distinct *Images*" (CL [*The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*], I, 511). There is the temptation to read this comment, and others like it, as a gloss upon the dome in air and to believe that the dimness of the image and its ethereality are positive achievements for Coleridge.<sup>13</sup> But the symbolic framework of the poem indicates that for an image to be indistinct or unstable is for it to be lost in the strong current of feelings. The voyage back to the original solidity of the Khan's dome is long and dangerous, and Coleridge knows that the closest he can come is "that dome in air." The reference of "that dome" is to the reflection of the original given in the first eleven lines, the vivid definition of Kubla's individuality, a definition that sets the proper bounds to his self without a proud self-assertion which defies divinity.

Could he approach the original image, it would win him the "deep delight." While he seems reluctant to surrender himself to the inspiration presented by the Abyssinian maid, he can still entertain thoughts of the deep joy that would accompany his assuming the prophetic role. The role is assumed, and the images that the mind creates are vivid realities in "The Ancient Mariner." But the deep delight he anticipates turns to fear and dread as his capturing, or rather his being captured by, the dream images that the mariner presents to the wedding guest constitutes a "dear ransom" of his individuality. He obtains not the individuality of a fruitful balance between the conscious and the unconscious, but a total extinction of personality.

#### Notes

1. I accept the date of October 1797 for "Kubla Khan" suggested by Griggs (CL, I, 348-49) and by E. K. Chambers, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), pp. 100-103. In the Preface to the published poem (1816) Coleridge said that it was written in the summer of 1797, but in a note on the Crewe manuscript he says, "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797." See Shelton, pp. 32-42. For a criticism of the 1797 date, see Schneider, pp. 153-237, and support for her argument offered by Jean Robertson, "The Date of 'Kubla Khan,'" *RES*, 18 (1967), 438-39.
2. PW, I, 296. The actual sentence, which E. H. Coleridge prints as a footnote, reads: "In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightfull Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure."
3. Grosart, III. 427. The discovery of textual variants in "Kubla Khan" indicates Coleridge's care with its composition.
4. J. B. Beer reminds us "of the tradition that Kubla Khan constructed his palace according to a dream" (p. 331 n. 3). But Coleridge is either unaware of the tradition or deliberately changes it, for the Khan's creation is conscious.
5. S. K. Heninger, Jr., offers a fascinating interpretation of the creation as a Jungian mandala in "A Jungian Reading of 'Kubla Khan,'" *JAAC* [*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*], 18 (1960), 358-67.
6. R. H. Fogle sees "the core of the poem to reside in an opposition or stress between the garden, artificial and finite, and the indefinite, inchoate, and possibly turbulent outside world" ("The Romantic Unity of 'Kubla Khan,'" *CE* [*College English*], 13 [1951], 15).

7. Lowes, p. 379.
8. *Metaphysics*, I, 3, in, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 694.
9. Lowes, p. 372 (Lowes's italics).
10. Ibid., p. 386 (Lowes's italics).
11. The lines are not separated in the Crewe MS. See Shelton.
12. I agree with Shelton's reading of the word *shadow* and his criticism (pp. 35-36) of Beer's contention that "the dome of pleasure is not the pleasure-dome which Kubla decreed" (p. 246).
13. Schneider, pp. 277-78. She argues against a symbolic reading but for a reading in which the beauty of the poem is its music and its vague but suggestive imagery. While I avoid symbolic readings as she does, I do not wish to rest Coleridge's claim to greatness solely upon the incantatory beauty of the poem. And although I speak here and elsewhere in terms of images, the images are symbolic in the Coleridgean sense that they constitute the reality that they represent, but that reality is not a spiritual one in the poetry. It is a mental reality, reflecting what is actually in the poet's, or speaker's, mind.

## Criticism: Timothy Bahti (essay date 1981)

SOURCE: "Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and the Fragment of Romanticism," in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 96, No. 5, December, 1981, pp. 1035-50.

[In the following essay, Bahti examines the language and structure of "Kubla Khan" and notes that it is both a fragment and a whole.]

I wrote reflections that, in many ways, were even stronger than their origin.

—Derek Walcott

[Der] negative Sinn ... entsteht, wenn einer bloß den Geist hat, ohne den Buchstaben; oder umgekehrt. ...

—Friedrich Schlegel<sup>1</sup>

When Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" appeared in 1816, the contemporary reviewers spoke of the poem's "nonsense." This "nonsense" was immediately related to the ostensibly partial character of the poem: it was not wholly a meaningful *poem*, but only meaningless music; or else, Coleridge had dared too much, and therefore succeeded at only little, or even nothing at all, that was meaningful.<sup>2</sup> Even when the poem was soon judged very positively, the discussion remained within the confines of the question of partiality and meaning: "Kubla Khan" was so perfect because it was purely sensual music and imagery, and did not at all need to be more, or whole.<sup>3</sup> In both cases the poem was considered as a fragment, while the possibility of one's understanding it laid claim to totalization. Either one could wholly understand it—but unfortunately there was no whole to understand—or one *did* wholly understand it, and that meant that one understood that it was not to be understood as a whole.

Nor do the later readings of "Kubla Khan" avoid this question of fragment and totality. One of the first great achievements of academic scholarship in romanticism (although widely surpassed today and condemned as misinterpretive) investigated the poem from the perspective of "source-study," whereby J. L. Lowes valued it as a combination from parts of other texts, like a *bricolage*.<sup>4</sup> One of the more recent, literary-historically more accurate studies understands the poem as a part of Coleridge's project for a new kind of epic (to be called *The Fall of Jerusalem*), but which, as a part, had already cancelled the whole of the projected epic: the "symbolic" history encompassing all ages is reduced to a visionary instant, and the two classical genres of the drama and

the epic are reduced to the lyric—whereby E. S. Shaffer nonetheless still calls “Kubla Khan” an “epic fragment.”<sup>5</sup> The more we know of this poem, of its sources and its author's intentions, the less we understand whether it is only a part or already a whole. This is particularly the case with the meaning of the poem: if we understand it ever better in part, then we still wonder whether there is a wholeness of meaning to it at all. The critic George Watson once said: “The fact is that almost everything is known about the poem except what it is about.”<sup>6</sup>

One could say the same of Coleridge. He stands as *the* fragmentary poet of English romanticism—perhaps, excepting Hölderlin, of European romanticism altogether—while a more precise overall interpretation of his oeuvre is still lacking. Rarely has one seen so many unaccomplished projects and unfinished texts: his writings lie there like a field of ruins and fragments. Yet within this “whole,” how does one characterize him? Is he mainly poet, or philosopher? Even if one does not deny the drive toward unity and totality in his poetic theories and speculative philosophy, one must concede that they remain fragments, and perhaps essentially fragmentary as well. But if according to the general English interpretation, Coleridge is essentially a poet—which means that he relates to particulars—and not a philosopher, this is often only the English prejudice against the “specious systems” of “empty” or “abstract” German idealism.

If in today's canon “Kubla Khan,” together with “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” is made to stand for Coleridge's poetry as a whole, so can every beginning student also say why the poem is representative of romantic poetry in general. Just looking at it superficially, one notices immediately the images, motifs, and ideas that today are held to be typically romantic. The Oriental setting on one hand, the emphasis on the sacred on another (“the sacred river” repeated three times, and also the ending)<sup>7</sup> are commonplaces of romanticism, and here they are related to one another through the revised understanding of orthodox Christianity current around the turn of the century, when the “higher criticism” of Eichenhorn and Herder saw the Orient as an initial stage toward Western Christianity. The talk of “caverns measureless to man” points to romantic theories of the sublime as well as to the suprahuman as a familiar principle whereby romanticism distinguishes itself from a cliché for the renaissance (“man is the measure of all things”). The haunted, the Gothic, and the erotic (ll. 14ff.) often appear at this time, as does the animation of the earth (ll. 17ff.), which signifies not only pantheism, but also, much more far-reaching, a renewed kind of lyric: instead of the *descriptive* landscape poetry of the 18th century, there is now once again *apostrophizing* nature poetry in the sense of *personification*—one thinks of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Shelley's odes, or many of Hölderlin's poems. The “romantic violence” of the second strophe—an uncontrollable outburst—may be easily related to the thematics of the French revolution, whereby Kubla Khan appears as the figure of a monarchical despot. At the end one notes the great estimation of the creative power of poetic “music” (ll. 45ff.), and also the adequation of speaking to seeing (l. 48), as typical of romantic and modern poetry: today one speaks of the English romantics as “the visionary company.”<sup>8</sup> The figure of the poet as inspired visionary closes this highly romantic poem. If one adds to this the introductory note as well (we know now that its story of the creation of the poem is false, but what is more important is that the fiction presents itself for the reader as true), the representative character of “Kubla Khan” becomes even stronger: here one has the motifs of the illness (as later in the figure of the *poète maudit*) and solitude of the poet (as in the figures for the poet in Wordsworth, Hölderlin, and others); the “anodyne” as a narcotic (a type that persists from De Quincey and Baudelaire to today); the concept of “inner senses” (see Wordsworth on the imagination as “when the light of sense goes out,”<sup>9</sup> *The Prelude* 1805, VI, ll. 534-35); and lastly the image of composing poetry in the middle of a trance or sleep (which we recognize from Rimbaud and again from surrealism's *écriture automatique*).

I have bothered with this catalogue of commonplaces of European romanticism, not only to show how “Kubla Khan” can be taken as a part for the whole of romantic poetry, but also to be able to abandon such thematic remarks and analyses. For it is my opinion that working thematically with the question of fragment and totality in romanticism doesn't get one anywhere. This is above all the case when this question concerns the fragment or totality of meaning and understanding; it is then a hermeneutic and structural question, no longer a thematic one. To be sure, there is the word and image of “fragment” in the subtitle, the note, and the poem

itself, but to understand this also means to interpret and to understand the whole poem *and* our own interpretation(s) as fragmentary or total. If one looks at the language and structure of the poem more closely, it may quickly be seen how many self-reflecting notions of part and whole, fragment and totality, come into play.

Later I will interpret the note more extensively, but first I would make just two introductory observations. Coleridge speaks of the composition of the poem as “the images [rising up] as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions.” First one has images as things, which means that the images appeared and were taken as if they were things. To this are added the expressions corresponding to the images, where “parallel” is to mean as much as “simultaneous,” although the “expressions” only appear afterwards in the syntax of Coleridge’s formulation. Thus one has expressions—the words of the poem—which correspond to images; and the latter appeared as things. The “correspondent” and “as” define a triadic relation of signification which is to be simultaneous, but in the “composition” (in the fiction of the composition) there were only two elements, and in the poem itself only one: in Coleridge’s “sleep” there were only images and expressions, while the things were merely metaphorical (“as”); and now one has only the words of the poem “here preserved.” Although these words are to correspond to images, and the images appeared “as” things, there was and is no *reference* except for reference to the metaphoric in itself. The appearance of images is the *semblance* of things, and the “parallel” appearance of words is the *correspondence* to this “first” appearance.

This chain of metaphoric reference—or reference to metaphors—depends, as always with metaphors, upon apparently clearly distinguished categories of identity and of opposition (word and image, image and thing), which must at first appear single, separate, and distinct, in order then to become comparable and substitutable in metaphors. The poem itself begins as if various oppositions will be maintained and developed. Not only is the poem in its strophes clearly divided into three stages of setting, eventful narrative, and retrospect together with a wishful prospect, but the first strophe itself forms a pair of stable dichotomies. If on the one hand the setting of Xanadu is first described as the infinite, where there is neither spatial (“caverns measureless to man”) nor temporal (“a sunless sea”) measure, then on the other hand the “pleasure-dome” is the place of the finite, with spatial boundaries (“twice five miles ... were girdled round”) and temporal categories (“blossomed” means seasons, and “forests ancient as the hills” introduces history). The clear opposition between “sunless” (l. 5) and “sunny” (l. 11) indicates the larger, categorical dichotomies which govern the opposition between Xanadu and the “pleasure-dome,” and the first strophe as a whole: the dichotomy between the infinite and the finite, and more precisely, that between the outside and the inside (“girdled round” and “enfolding”), and that between the hyperbolic and the defined.

Like the poem as a whole, the second strophe is itself divided in a threefold manner: it represents a sequence of fragmentation (ll. 12-24), repetition and attempted closing (ll. 25-30), and paradoxical reflection (ll. 31-36). But this division is not at all as sustaining and stable as that of the three separate strophes appeared to be. For what is fragmentation? In this strophe, as a scene of fragmentation, oppositions and dichotomies such as those of the first strophe are also split apart. The clear distinctions and oppositions introduced in the note and conditioning the whole poem are at stake here, and none more than the opposition between fragment and totality.

After the “deep romantic chasm” has run transversely and aslant through the pleasure-dome and has been personified (“As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing”), this chasm becomes the locus of an outburst: *from* this chasm, within the whole of the chasm, “A mighty fountain momentarily was forced.” What now follows from this is one of our literature’s most curious representations of an origin as the result of fragmentations. First, there is within this bursting-forth of the fountain (“Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst”) yet another outburst: “Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail.” Like the fountain appearing as a part of the whole of the chasm, this relation between whole and part repeats itself here through the word “Amid,” and indeed with the introduction of the word “fragment”: from the fountain—now construed as a

whole—the “fragments” are thrown. We are at the fount of the fragments in the poem, or at their origin. One must now inquire how, in an ever-increasing self-reflexivity of the poem, this fount of the fragments is also the origin *of the poem itself*. For as this sequence of divisions develops further—whereby a part within a whole becomes a whole for yet another part<sup>10</sup>—these categories (of a part as something within a whole, a fragment as a part of a preexisting totality) invert themselves. With the repetition of the word “Amid” (“And 'mid,” l. 23), the third fragmentation is not one of a part within a whole, but rather a chiasmic inversion with the whole within the part: “And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever / It flung up momentarily the sacred river.” What until now has been a whole for the parts—the fountain for the fragments—is now, within these parts (“And 'mid these dancing rocks”), itself a part which at once produces and bursts a whole: the river; or, better, the river is produced in its bursting. And this happens precisely as the “fragments”—initially an undefined general concept—are identified as specific things (“rocks”): definitionally, as the whole of the word becomes a defined part. Thus, at the highest point of division and fragmentation, there is the production of that which the beginning of the first strophe already spoke of: the sacred river. And thus one can say—finding once again a whole, or the beginning of a whole, within a fragment—that the poem and its first strophe begin “amid” the second strophe; they spring out of, or take their origin from, the fragmented fountain. Here there arises not just *thematically* the outer world (Xanadu) within the fragmentation of the inner world (the pleasure-dome), but in the perspective of *structural self-reflexivity* there also arises the possibility of the first strophe amid the second: only now, after its origin, is there the condition of possibility for a narration of the course of the river. This inverted temporality—the origin or the possibility of a beginning only after the beginning—is also noticeable in the temporal terms. The fragmentations are a series of instants (“Momently,” ll. 19 and 24), but amid these instants there appears one (“at once”) which suddenly becomes an infinity (“and ever,” l. 23). Once again, the possibility of a continuous temporality of the river springs forth from out of a fragmentation. Or does this not on the contrary mean that this origin-as-fragmentation perpetually remains just that, fragmentation, never achieving a fluid continuity?

What follows immediately thereafter is characterized by its slower rhythm, the calming repetitions of phrases from the first strophe and alliterations of *m* and *r*, as if the poem is now to “run onward” by way of a repetition of its beginning (see “ran,” l. 26). But is this the beginning of a narrative of continuity? On the contrary, the river runs toward “tumult”; and with the reappearance of an “And 'mid” (l. 29) this tumult is defined as a repeating present of the poem: the attempt at a whole comprehension or total representation of the narrative's time brings with it its own destruction, as one hears that the past (“Ancestral voices”) only leads to a prophesied future of returning tumult (war). The last third of the second strophe stays with this running river. At first there is yet another representation of a middle: “The shadow of the dome of pleasure / Floated midway on the waves.” This “midway” forms a centering between extremes—above (“dome”) and below (under the “waves”)—just as the following lines also represent a harmonizing (“the mingled measure”) of extremes (“From the fountain and the cave”: above and below, upwards and downwards). Even the “miracle” of the last couplet harmonizes extremes in the rhetorical form of a paradox (“sunny” and “ice”). Is this centering and harmonizing—a reestablished symmetry, even if a narrative standstill—the answer to the earlier splitting and fragmentation that were brought into the poem by the “slanting romantic chasm” and the various “Amids”? Is this fragmentation annulled and elevated (*aufgehoben*) precisely here into a new totality of symmetrical opposites?

The interesting thing in these lines is the “shadow.” For shadows are the inversions of reflections; instead of light thrown back, they are the interruptions of light thrown forward. But as such shapes they still refer back to their originals. Here the original is, thematically, the pleasure-dome itself, but as already mentioned, the centering and harmonizing of these lines is also the self-reflection of a figurative expression: the rhetorical figure of the paradox. This self-reflection occurs in the middle of the statement, “It was a miracle of rare device,” for “device” also means “devise” in the renaissance sense of a rhetorical figure. The paradox itself—“A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice”—is a familiar figure, one of Petrarch's favorite paradoxes, which often shows up in later European Petrarchism. But what does it mean that a possible narrative of the course of the river through the pleasure-dome should be brought to a standstill of rhetorical self-reflexivity, as

if the poem finds itself in a restored totality and symmetry of rhetoric? To claim as much would be to succumb to the aesthetic seduction of these six beautiful, highly rhetorical lines. For in spite of all the symmetries, repetitions and apparently totalizing tendencies, the self-reflexive rhetoric is itself also a place of fragmentation.

In the subtitle the poem is called “a Vision,” and according to the note it is a part of a recollected and represented vision. One notices immediately that the last strophe mirrors this structure of the poem's genesis: as the “I” of the narrator appears for the first time, it is said he once “saw” something which he now wants to revive and represent. More striking is the parallel between the structures of the relations of signification in the note and in this last strophe. Like the poem that is to produce the vision of “images as things” through its “correspondent” words, here a poetic representation is intended to produce an image as a thing. Thematically, this refers to Xanadu—“That dome in air! those caves of ice!”—but in an entirely strict and literally self-reflexive sense it is also the poem “Kubla Khan”: the line just quoted repeats line 36 quite closely. Thus, to recollect, revive, and represent an image as a thing means to bring a previous image to consciousness—the paradox of the “miracle of rare device”—and to rewrite it again, or further. The figure of the narrator appears in this “I” as a self-reader; the “I” that has once seen a maid, and wants to revive and represent her song of the pleasure-dome, here names the poet who has “seen” (read) his own words in the first two strophes of his poem, and would now re-present them once again.

An interpretation of the structural self-reflexivity of the poem leads yet further into the thematics of this strophe. What the “I” saw and heard was “an Abyssinian maid, / And on her dulcimer she played, / Singing of Mount Abora.” Abora is the river of Eden, thus the fount of mankind's beginning, or in the strict sense: the origin (as if “*ab-oraginal*”). Similarly, Abyssinia—at this time being explored as the place of origin of the Nile river—was frequently used as an image of an origin.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, one notes that each name begins with *a* and *b*, so that these names of origins include the beginning of the alphabet as well. Lastly, I would add that *abba* (*a* plus *b*) is the Hebrew word for “father.” Taken together, the two names and their significations refer to origins and founts, or more precisely, to a continuity between origins and beginnings, a successive, almost genealogical continuity, like that of the alphabet or a relationship between father and sons. Thus one can note here an attempted rewriting of the second strophe, where the origin arising from fragmentation only led to tumult and then to the standstill of the narrative. To remember, and to revive and repeat, the image of an Abyssinian maid singing of Abora, would mean to construct a double continuity between origin and image (what was there, and what is to be there again): like the maid's song of the origin, Coleridge's repetition of this poetic music is to represent the first, “original” images—those of the poem itself—as if they were real things (“I would build that dome in air / ... And all who heard should see them there”).

The names' play of allusion to the alphabet refers back to the first strophe. For there, too, the first three lines of the poem played with alphabetical order: “Xanadu” is pronounced as *z* and there one finds the river *Alph*, which in Greek (*alpha*) as well as Hebrew (*aleph*) signifies the first letter. When one speaks of last things, then, one finds the first ones already included. Or put another way, to write and read words (those of the poem according to the note; those of the first two strophes from the perspective of the third; those of the “Abyssinian maid” from the standpoint of the “I”) means already to presuppose images (those of the vision and those of the “pleasure-dome” and the maid) and also images “as” things. Does this mean that the parts, like the letters, must already be understood within a delimited, finite whole? Or does the appearance of the words of the poem in the first strophe already presuppose their “earlier” appearance in the image of the singing maid as well as their later reappearance as actual, real images (“And all who heard should see them there”)? Ultimately, does this mean that fragments and fragmentation must again—or always already—be understood within a totality, so that “Kubla Khan” represents a dialectic of the apparent totality of the first strophe, the productive fragmentation of the second, and the restored, re-collecting totality of the third? And might this dialectic of self-reflexive writing and reading be the actual, proper meaning of the poem's self-reflexivity: one reads what one writes, and as a reading one produces positively what the writing itself had negated?



Here two doubting remarks may be added. In one of the poem's manuscripts (the so-called "Crewe MS.") there is "Amora" instead of "Abora." What is significant here is not the play on love (*amor*), but rather the allusion to *Amara*, which in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (IV, 281) names a *false* Abyssinian Eden. As also in the note's fiction, the "original" can be untrue, and its further repetitions and representations a mirroring of the false instead of a production of the true from out of its "negative" source or origin. The second point concerns the temporality of the repetition in this third strophe. It is unquestionable, *not* that something was there before—be it Coleridge's vision, or the pleasure-dome, or the singing maid—but rather that the temporality has been determinable and established up to this point: the whole poem up to line 41 is in the past tense, and indeed up to this point it is also self-reflexively past, that is, already written and read by Coleridge. The remainder of the third strophe, on the other hand, is in the conditional or the imperative; one could not rightly say that anything is present, for there is no present without the indicative. One can deduce the following from this distinction in temporalities. While the main part of the poem is in a narratable and readable temporal sequence—something was; now "I" am writing about it; "you" will then read it—the poem from line 42 onward is no longer narratable but only performable. The last thirteen lines are a matter of a *possible* writing and reading, wherein a first "reading" or recollecting—"Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song"—would be the condition of possibility for the further writing and reading, and not the inverse. Up to line 41, the whole poem was scarcely anything other than a perpetual self-reflexive self-reading and rewriting. Can the remainder now perform a further repetition? Only when a "reading" of Coleridge's revival of the "song" is performed—even if only implicitly—would the "images" and "things" be there about which he could write narratively. But such a "reading" would already be the production or the writing. One can always read and write backwards from line 41—as that which is past, the meaning to be achieved always remains "behind" one—but from line 42 on, one can only read and write forwards; which means that there is no meaning behind the lines which one could then represent or discover and interpret, but rather only a meaning that is still to be performed. Although the first five lines of this strophe refer thematically to the preceding part of the poem, thereafter Coleridge cannot read his own poem, but on the contrary, only the possibility of his writing. But this means not to read something, or to read a nothing. How could such a poem as "Kubla Khan" be at all possible? It is as if the "I" (Coleridge the poet or narrator) would only now write a poem about the pleasure-dome: "I would build that dome in air" presupposes that words could arise like images *which are not yet there*, and that is a question of the presuppositions of a reading which is also not yet there.

We stand before an ever-inverting mirror symmetry of writing and reading—to write further presupposes a reading, but in order to read something must first already be written—rather like the poem itself that first had to begin in order to arrive at the origin of its beginning. To play for a moment with a false etymology, is the "Abyssinian maid" the point in the poem where we came upon an abyss of sense? If we would understand this paradoxical symmetry, this standstill of self-reflection, we must avoid a premature, totalizing allegory of rhetoric. For if the narrative self-reflexively led to the unreadable and therefore unnarratable structure of the poem, so that in the self-reflection of rhetoric the possibility of narration was at once granted and taken back, the poem has still not arrived at a totality of its representation and meaning—even if as the representation of its non-sense.

If one now looks more closely at the note, a more precise image of the allegory of this poem and its mirror symmetry appears. On the one hand there is the story of Coleridge's failed attempt to write down the "distinct recollection of the whole," on the other hand the counter-image of the self-restoration of the visions in the pool's mirror. After the interruption Coleridge retained only a "dim recollection of the general purport of the vision," which means he fell from the "distinct whole" into an allegorical, more exactly, an aenigmatic part, for "dim" here indicates, almost like a technical term, the realm of the allegorical.<sup>12</sup> The "lines and images" left behind indeed point to the destroyed whole, but the movement from part to whole—from letters and words to purport or meaning—remains allegorically dimmed: Coleridge remains within a partial hermeneutic of the aenigma with written fragments which are supposed to signify a "whole meaning." And when one stands (or has fallen) in an aenigma or allegory, the understanding of it remains similarly aenigmatic or allegorical.

Opposed to this, the counter-image in the other, adjoined bit of verse at first appears as the temptation of a restoration of a total understanding in the unifying of fragments into a renewed totality. But the allegorical fragments (again the word “dim”) would reunite not just into a whole reflection of the meaning of visions, but also—the allusion to Narcissus is unmistakable—into a mirroring of the observer as an image within the allegorical visions: and thus also, once again, only an image (a part) amongst other images. This idyllic counter-image is therefore just as reflective of partial character as Coleridge's own experience; the error of Narcissus was to take his image as an independent whole. When Coleridge writes in the note that some fragments were left behind for him, while the others passed away like disturbed mirror-images on water “without the after restoration of the latter,” he indicates that the parts—including those of this recollection or understanding—remain forever fragmentary, without so much as the temptation of Narcissus' error.

The reference to “images on the surface of a stream” reminds one of lines 31-32, where the shadow of the pleasure-dome floated midway on the waves of the river. We are now in a position to understand how this paradoxical centering remains in the middle of a fragmentation of attempted totalities. For as the shadow is an inversion of a reflection, its significance is here an inversion of its thematics: not the production of the pleasure-dome (as the meaning or referent of the shadow), but that of the rhetoric of the poem—an allegory of shadowy mirrorings. And when a fragment is precisely to *mirror* a missing totality, this means—in this logic of inversion—that the “totality” is inverted into a fragment. For in the “nature” (or rhetoric) of the case, mirrorings are always inversions. Ultimately it is the same with our fragmentary understanding of the poem, for to interpret the fragments—the various words and images which are to mirror a meaning—means to understand their inversions of meaning as totality into meaning as fragmentary, which then means forever to interpret their meaning in a fragmentary manner. As the adjoined bit of verse in the note says, the fragmented mirror-images “each mis-shape the other”: the conceptual pairs of fragment and totality, poem and meaning, text and interpretation perpetually *mis-shape* one another.

This is the case in this poem—but not only in this one—because it concerns rhetoric, by which I refer not merely to the specific rhetorical figures such as hyperbole, chiasmus or paradox, but rather to its misshaping or inverting organization of the fundamental structures of the true and the false, the original and the represented, the image and meaning. The poem is structured in a temporal sequence according to which there was first a vision and its “distinct recollection,” then the attempt at its representation; put another way, first came the images, then their verbal representation and narration. When this attempted representation and narration then fall into an allegory of rhetoric, one could perhaps still believe that the original would remain unrhetorical—or *literal*—in the conditions of its possibility. This would then in turn be the condition of possibility for a literal understanding of the allegory. But in the note, as the author falls ever further away from the original vision in the play of increasingly failing “recollection,” it is said that “the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him.” The important thing here is the “originally, as it were,” for the small proviso signifies that the allegory of rhetoric in the poem does not begin from a literal element, but rather takes its point of departure from an already metaphorical (“as it were” or “as if”) “origin”—or from a metaphor. As in the poem itself the origin of the river takes place only after the beginning, in a fragmentation and chiasmic inversion, the origin of the poem has “from the beginning” already rhetorically split or fragmented itself. Words are to be literal (“correspondent”) images of the original images, but since these “originally” original images are already figurative (“as it were”) expressions, the representational words of the poem are also always already unliteral, not wholly themselves, but rather rhetorically doubled and divided. If one begins from “metaphoricity,” one is already in a fragmented allegory of rhetoric.

This last inversion of the literal and the rhetorical, according to which the “original” that one was “wholly” to represent is already brought forth as rhetorically fragmented, also runs through the poem from the beginning onward. For when it is said, “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree,” the word “decree” is already similarly divided. Let us recall the third strophe, where in the phrase “Could I revive within me” the performance of the narrative of the pleasure-dome and the narration of its performance came to a standstill

together. On the one hand, “decree” here means to pronounce and to perform a decision: for example, a pleasure-dome is to be somewhere, and suddenly it is there, already performed and produced. On the other hand, “decree” means to separate, to distinguish and to decide: for example, the pleasure-dome should be itself and not something else. The two significations align themselves against one another as the possibility of a representation and the preceding judgment upon this possibility: if it were the case that a pleasure-dome is to be produced, then its representation and narration could also be performed; but this would also mean to decide what and whether a pleasure-dome would be at all. The crisis of the poem and its meaning is contained in this. To decide between “decree” as performance and “decree” as judgment is the same as to decide between the literal and the rhetorical, the original and the restored, thematics and self-reflexivity, or the already-narratable and the only-performable. It scarcely seems an accident that a “crisis” itself signifies such a separation and difference (*krinein*), or that the “device” of the poem—both the thematic as well as the rhetorical production of the pleasure-dome—itself already signifies “division.” For when one cannot distinguish and therefore cannot decide between two divided or fragmented significations, one then has a crisis: that of the separation or differentiation (the “original-partition” in Hölderlin’s sense<sup>13</sup>) between judgment and meaning. And this crisis is as such—once again *krinein*—the *critique* in the middle of literary criticism itself.

Criticism encounters this crisis of self-inverting, but forever finds still divided parts of the text and understanding each time that it would speak of the fragment of romanticism. Romantic fragments—which, like Coleridge’s “romantic chasm,” refer to previous totalities that are to be re-produced but at the same time invert the latter back into fragments through their mirrorings—never arrive at a critical understanding without mirroring criticism in its own crisis of fragmented meaning and divided judgment. When Friedrich Schlegel, in the famous *Athenäum* fragment 116, said of “romantic poetry” that it can “hover on the wings of poetic reflection in the middle [between the represented and the representing], forever re-empower this reflection and multiply it as in an endless series of mirrors,” this reflection—between totality and fragment, thematics and rhetoric—is exactly like Coleridge’s paradoxical shadow, which floats mid-way on the waves, forever “empowers” itself in reflecting parts and images, but never arrives at the totality of a wholly self-mirroring meaning. This “perpetual alternation between self-creation and self-annihilation” (AF 51; see KF 28 and 37) of meaning is also, I suggest, Schlegel’s concept of “negative meaning,” which is defined as “a presentiment or foretaste without a second proposition or postscript [*Vorgefühl ohne Nachsatz*]” (KF 69). This *negative meaning* of the romantic fragment and of romanticism in general does not belong to any understanding of the matter that could stand at an end-point, reach back and narrate; rather, it is always underway, pre-sensing or anticipating without being able to complete or fulfill—totalize—anything. Thus the title of the latest translation of Schlegel’s fragments is perhaps a bit misleading: the romantic fragment points not so much to an *absolu littéraire* as to a *lecture littéraire non-absolue*.<sup>14</sup> For this reason it hardly makes sense to speak of the “romantic fragment” or of “romanticism” as a historically-closed part or whole. Endlessly self-inverting and self-empowering readings are projected by romanticism’s self-reflection and remain the fragments of its meaning. Romanticism itself thereby becomes the fragment of romanticism, and as readers who, in interpreting this meaning, themselves in turn become reflected fragments, critics and literary criticism are also the fragment of romanticism, parts left behind from a self-fragmenting allegory of meaning.

## Notes

1. Kritische Fragmente, No. 69, in Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften*, ed. W. Rasch (Munich: Hanser, 1970). Cited in the text below with the abbreviations KF (*Kritische Fragmente*) and AF (*Athenäums-Fragmente*).
2. Cf. William Hazlitt, *The Examiner* (2 June 1816) and Thomas Moore, *The Edinburgh Review* (September 1816), in Coleridge, *The Ancient Mariner and Other Poems: A Casebook*, ed. A. Jones and W. Tydeman (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 62, 65, and 74-76.
3. Cf. Leigh Hunt, *The Examiner* (21 October 1821), in Coleridge ... *A Casebook*, p. 81; and John Bowring, *The Westminster Review* (January 1830), in Coleridge: *The Critical Heritage*, ed. J. Jackson (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 550.

4. J. L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927).
5. E. S. Shaffer, 'Kubla Khan' and *The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 18 ff.
6. George Watson, *Coleridge the Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 119.
7. "Kubla Khan," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), I, 295-98. Subsequent citations of "Kubla Khan" refer to this edition.
8. Cf. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961).
9. *The Prelude*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd ed. revised by H. Darbishire (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 1805 text, VI, ll. 534-35. Subsequent citations of *The Prelude* refer to this parallel text edition of the poem.
10. This is precisely the meaning of "half-intermittent burst": the divisions further empower themselves through a splitting or halving of the middle, thus, "half-intermittent." I thank Arden Reed for having called my attention to this.
11. Cf. Wordsworth's famous simile for imagination as a self-concealing origin, "like the mighty flood of Nile / Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds / To fertilise the whole Egyptian plain," *The Prelude* 1850, VI, ll. 614-16.
12. I Cor. 13:12, for example, translates *aenigmatē* as "darkly," and an *aenigma* is called a "dark allegory" in the rhetorical handbooks.
13. I refer to Hölderlin's Homburger-fragment which today is called "Urteil und Sein"; he there understands judgment (*Urteil*) as the original partition (*Ur-teilung*) between being and consciousness.
14. *L'Absolu littéraire—Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand*, ed. P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J. L. Nancy (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

## Criticism: Billie Burnett King (essay date 1981)

SOURCE: "Coleridge's Mandala," in *Southwest Review*, Vol. 66, No. 4, Autumn, 1981, pp. 404-10.

[In the following essay, King analyzes "Kubla Khan" in the context of Carl Jung's theory of the structure of the human psyche.]

The Age of Enlightenment was one of those recurring periods in the history of Western man during which Reason attempts to swallow all the affective states of personality and is, for a time, apparently successful. During this particular era, the intellectually elite firmly believed that Reason and his elder son, Science, would not only solve all of man's problems but also make possible the full realization of his potential. When the great god Reason failed, as he was fated to do, Western man, led by the Romantic rebels, sought to become whole again through the restoration to human personality of the intuitive and the affective. That he oftentimes went to the extreme in this direction is beside the point.

One of the most ardent and most articulate proponents of the doctrine of wholeness was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In his critical and philosophical writings he discusses again and again and from many points of view the problem of unity in the midst of multiplicity. Typical is the closing paragraph of his discussion of poetry and the poet in Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*: "Finally, Good Sense is the Body of poetic genius, Fancy its drapery, Motion its Life, and Imagination the Soul that is everywhere and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole." That he recognized that this wholeness is achieved only through the reconciliation of polar opposites is borne out in his essay on Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*:

In Shakespeare's *poems* the creative power and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace. Each in its excess of strength seems to threaten the extinction of the other. At length in the Drama they were reconciled, and fought each with its shield before the breast of the other. Or like two rapid streams, that, at their first meeting within narrow and rocky banks, mutually strive to repel each other and intermix reluctantly and in tumult; but soon finding a wider channel and more yielding shores blend, and dilate, and flow on in one current and with one voice.

Coleridge was a genius of great versatility—poet, philosopher, critic, journalist, lecturer, dramatist. There is overwhelming evidence that he was a Phaeton trying unsuccessfully to achieve mastery of all the diverse elements within his own nature. That he was aware of what was involved in self-mastery is shown in his definition of a poet:

The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of imagination.

This passage, in addition, gives powerful support to the theory that he used his poetry as a vehicle for his attempted realization of his potential self. The images, the structure, and the meaning of “Kubla Khan” can best be understood from this point of view and especially through C. G. Jung's theory of the structure of the human psyche as it relates to the process of individuation.

In brief, Jung theorized (in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*) that the human psyche is made up of three dimly defined “layers,” each layer differing from the other two in nature and in function and each layer being equally important in the life of the entity. The top layer is the ego-consciousness which is man's most recent acquisition in his psychological development. *All* the contents of the ego are conscious. The middle layer of the psyche is the personal unconscious, which is the receptacle for psychical elements once conscious but now forgotten and for elements that the ego cannot accommodate and must, therefore, repress into the unconscious. The lower layer is what Jung terms the collective unconscious, the ancient mind possessed by primitive man and filled with his experiences, his feelings, his reactions to given situations. This mind, shared by all men everywhere, is regarded by Jung as the common denominator of humanity. The contents of the collective unconscious not only are unknown to the ego but are so alien to its nature as to make them inconceivable to it. These contents, which Jung calls archetypes, manifest themselves only during psychotic or affective states, during fantasies and visions, or during dreams.

The archetype is a universal image that presents itself to the ego-consciousness in a perceivable form as a person, an animal, a monster, a plant, a mineral, or a social or topographical feature. Although there are many archetypes, those relevant to an analysis of “Kubla Khan” are the anima, the shadow, the Wise Old Man, the mandala, and Paradise. Very briefly, the anima is the feminine personification of the collective unconscious in the male. The anima is bipolar and may, therefore, be presented in its positive aspect as a fair woman, as a good woman, or as a maiden. On the other hand, it may be presented in its negative aspect as a dark woman, as an evil woman, or as a crone. The shadow, which is the personification of the personal unconscious, represents everything that an individual refuses to admit about himself. A well-known example of this archetype is Mephistopheles, Faust's shadow. The third important archetype is what Jung calls the Wise Old Man. This archetype, which may be presented in either human or animal form, is the personification of the spirit who can comprehend preexistent meaning in the chaos of life.

The day-to-day relationship of the ego-consciousness and the unconscious is extremely important in the life of the individual. When the unconscious threatens to swallow up the ego-consciousness, a state of psychosis

results during which the strange, irrational contents of the unconscious irrupt. On the other hand, when the ego pretends that the unconscious is nonexistent, the personality is cold and static and sterile. The unconscious refuses to be ignored for long, however, and often asserts itself in unsavory ways. In the normal healthy state of affairs, the ego-consciousness and the unconscious are paradoxically engaged in both open conflict and open collaboration. This is represented symbolically as the eternal attraction and the eternal conflict between male (reason, mind, sun) and female (emotion, body, moon). Personality is whole and life is lived to its fullest during this state of conflict-collaboration.

Jung uses the term *individuation* for the process of personality development which arises out of this conflict between the two fundamental psychic facts. Individuation is the movement toward wholeness, toward realization of potential. Since the static state of personality is a result of the complete dominance by the ego-consciousness, this individuation process can oftentimes be accomplished only through the apparent destruction of the ego. This necessary descent of the personality into the unconscious is accompanied by grave danger—the possibility of psychosis, the permanent loss of consciousness (see Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*). In myth and literature this is often portrayed as a descent into hell. The ego regards this descent as a peril of the soul and seeks to protect itself from annihilation by the unconscious by finding a place of safety. Throughout his development, man has regarded the circle as having magical properties, as being a place of safety and sanctuary. It is thus a *temenos*, a taboo area where the ego can meet the unconscious with a minimum degree of danger.

During a disassociative state, in an effort toward self-healing or individuation, the psyches of some individuals produce either orally or graphically the mandala, the fourth archetype relevant to an analysis of “Kubla Khan.” The completed mandala is a universal symbol of safety and wholeness, or the perhaps momentary union of all polar opposites in the personality. Although the mandala is usually presented as a circle, it may also be presented as a square, another symbol of wholeness. When a square is drawn either within or without a circle, the process is known as squaring the circles and is considered to be an important step in the effort toward finding the center of the self.

The mandala, which is a representation of a personality at a given moment, is traditionally made up of three concentric circles. The Self is in the center surrounded by images representative of the consciousness in the inner circle. The motifs in the next larger circle represent in graphic form the contents of the personal unconscious, while the motifs in the largest outlying circle represent elements of the collective unconscious. When a mandala nears completion, indicating the approaching full realization of self, the motifs occur in paired opposites. This pairing of opposites indicates a healthy state of tension between the ego-consciousness and the unconscious. Two sets of paired opposites, often composed of the Hero or Wise Old Man archetypes, the shadow, and the two aspects of the anima, may form a quaternity, which is a squaring of the circle and thus is seen as indicative of approaching wholeness.

“Kubla Khan” evinces great structural unity when it is viewed as a mandala created by the psyche of Coleridge, and when its images are considered to be motifs for the mandala. Actually, the poem presents two mandalas—one envisioned and one longed for. The first mandala is incomplete; the second is a completed duplicate of the first.

The major motifs of Coleridge's mandala are the quaternity, additional sets of paired opposites, and Paradise, the fifth important archetype in the poem.

The quaternity here is composed, first of all, of Kubla Khan, who, as an example of the Wise Old Man archetype, is the spirit who makes sense or order from the chaos of existence. This view is supported by the fact that he not only walled out chaos in the Paradise he decreed but also included in this Paradise elements hitherto chaotic but now ordered and harmonious. The “demon lover,” an excellent example of the shadow archetype, is the second member of the quaternity. The final members of this quaternity are the bipolar aspects

of the anima. The “Abyssinian maid”—not a maiden from Ethiopia, but the maiden from the abyss (the unconscious)—is the positive aspect of the anima; the “woman wailing for her demon lover” in the chasm is its negative aspect. This quaternity—the Wise Old Man, the shadow, and the two aspects of the anima—is a personification of the Self at the moment the mandala was created. (Figure 28 in Jung’s *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* shows a mandala with a quaternity very much like that described in “Kubla Khan.”)

The second important motif in “Kubla Khan” is that of Paradise. The etymology of the word *paradise*, i.e., *wall around*, has deep psychological implications as a place of safety. It is an example of the squaring of the circle and, as such, of the *temenos* which offers sanctuary to the ego and protection from annihilation by the unconscious. This motif has as its paired opposite the chasm, “a savage place” filled with the “ceaseless turmoil” of the “sacred river” forced up as a fountain with huge rocks vaulting like hail. The chasm, of course, is a feminine symbol for the unconscious. The river near which Kubla Khan has built his paradise is the water of life necessary for wholeness and self-realization and is thus another symbol for the unconscious. The “mighty fountain” represents the tremendous power of this water of life—power to make huge rocks dance. (The dance is a much-used symbol for life lived to its fullest.)

The other images in the poem form opposite pairs that symbolize the healthy state of tension between the conscious and the unconscious, a state in which the personality is approaching wholeness.

Alph, the name of the sacred river, is closely related to the first symbol of various alphabets and is, therefore, a fitting representation for the primitive mind, the unconscious. When the initial phoneme of Xanadu, a place of civilization, is considered, it becomes the logical opposite to Alph and, as a place of order in the midst of chaos, a perfect symbol for the ego.

Although the sun, as such, is not an image in the poem, it is implicit in the word *sunny*. The sun is a masculine symbol for reason, for the ego. Therefore, in the lines “And here were forests ancient as the hills, / enfolding sunny spots of greenery” and “A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!” we have the masculine “sunny” and its paired opposites, the feminine “forests” and “dome.” (And in the latter passage we have another pairing of opposites, the feminine “caves” with the masculine “ice.”) Another image within the poem used as a paired opposite to the masculine sun is the feminine moon: “As e’er beneath a waning moon ...” According to Jung, the “waning moon”—or horned moon—is itself a symbol of harmony, or psychic wholeness.

The abyss implicit in “Abyssinian maid” has as its paired opposite “Mount Abora.” The etymology of “Abora” shows that the word means “away from the mouth.” It is thus the height away from the mouth of the abyss—the conscious as opposed to the unconscious. In addition, Mount Abora is a representation of the triangle which may follow the squaring of the circle and is the stage in individuation that points toward unity and that is followed by the unchangeable circle of perfection.

The first mandala, then, is made up of a quaternity, of a walled area, and of a multiplicity of paired opposites showing the approach to psychic wholeness. However, the center of the mandala where the image of the Self should be is empty. Or, as Jung says, in the center is nothing; the quaternity represents the Self.

In the last section of the poem, the persona envisions another mandala which duplicates the one seen but which has the Self as center. In other words, he would have completed the process of individuation and would have found the center of personality. This can be seen when he says,

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!

That *he* is the center of this envisioned mandala is shown by the fact that the three circles of the mandala would be woven around him.

The vision of the perfect Self is often represented in the center of the mandala as a divinity. The Self in this completed mandala is thus envisioned. The divinity has “flashing eyes,” “floating hair,” and has eaten of the miraculous food. The all-seeing eye in mandala symbolism is turned toward consciousness. The floating hair forms the spikes or rays surrounding the head of the sun god, the classical symbol for the unity and divinity of the Self. The god acquires perfect wisdom and perfect understanding through eating the miraculous foods—the honey-dew and the milk of Paradise. (See Jung's discussion of *soma* in his *Symbols of Transformation* and the *honey-dew* in his *Alchemical Studies*.)

Coleridge's own well-known account, viewed with some skepticism in recent years, of the creation of “Kubla Khan” lends strong support to the theory of its being a mandala, especially when it is remembered that a mandala is produced only during a disassociative state. In addition, its interpretation as an oral mandala renders the poem much more than a hodgepodge of euphonious sounds and exotic images—the prevalent view heretofore.

That Coleridge did not make the perilous descent into the unconscious unscathed is attested to by the deeply moving letters written to friends in which he describes his sufferings in sleep, so terrible that he blessed his screams of agony that awakened him. After one such episode, he “scribbled” (in his own words) in a letter to Robert Southey “doggerel” that was later published (in his *Letters*, edited by Ernest Hartley Coleridge) as the “Pains of Sleep.” Its second stanza is a graphic description of the terrors that the swarming contents of the uncontrolled unconscious pose to the ego. At the moment of the creation of “Kubla Khan,” however, there is the vision of psychic wholeness in which the ego-consciousness and the unconscious are in a healthy state of open warfare and open collaboration.

## Criticism: Donald Pearce (essay date 1981)

SOURCE: “‘Kubla Khan’ in Context,” in *Studies in English Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Autumn, 1981, pp. 565-83.

[In the following essay, Pearce proposes that Coleridge's notebooks, letters, and early poetry all contain details that are strongly reminiscent of the landscape in “Kubla Khan.”]

In the *Paradise Lost*—indeed in every one of his poems—it is Milton himself whom you see; his Satan, his Adam, his Raphael, almost his Eve—are all John Milton; and it is a sense of this intense egotism that gives me the greatest pleasure in reading Milton's works.

—S. T. Coleridge<sup>1</sup>

The Notebook accounts Coleridge kept of the walking tour of the Lake District which he took with Wordsworth in the fall of 1799 and the detailed entries on other excursions, taken for the most part alone, into the mountains around Keswick the following summer, are among the most interesting pages of natural description to have come down to us from the entire period. For sheer absorption in the act of looking at things, in richness and closeness of observed detail, they are often superior to the Alfoxden and Grasmere *Journals* of Dorothy Wordsworth; and certainly they make William's *Guide to the Lakes* seem sedate reading enough.



Coleridge of course, in 1799, was “discovering” the Lake country and that must account for some of the passion with which he experienced and wrote about it. Yet one is struck by the objectivity of the passion; there is no tendency to moralize about the landscape, the aim obviously being to get down in the most direct and exact terms—color, shape, height, distance in feet—the actual appearance of the scenes before his eyes. His speculative powers seemed put to rest in the mountains, and seeing, sensing, feeling, recording took over instead.

One is aware, however, especially in the pages devoted to the solitary walks of 1800 (written probably for Sara Hutchinson's eyes), of an urgency and alertness quite different from that of the mere nature lover. What emerges is the image of a man searching for something he more than half expects to find just over the next ridge—“Some wilderness-plot, green & fountainous, & unviolated by Man,” as he put it in one early entry.<sup>2</sup> Again and again he will seem to be on the point of finding it, whatever it is, then not. One notices a quickening in the writing whenever certain features of landscape or certain effects of light and shade are found together. Here are a few examples from the 1799-1800 *Notebook*:

we look up the River & behold it pouring itself down thro' a steep bed of rocks, with a wall of woods on each—& again over the other wall of the Bridge the same scene in a long visto [sic] except that here instead of rapid a deep-solemn pool of still water, which ends in a rapid only in the far distance.—The grey ruin faces you on the one side—over the other in contrast of this still pool with the soft murmur of the distant rapid—& a handsome Gentleman's house in the distance.<sup>3</sup>

—River Greta near its fall into the Tees—Shootings of water threads ever down the slope of the huge green stone—The white Eddy-rose that blossom'd up against the stream in the scollop, by fits & starts, obstinate in resurrection—It *is the life* that we live—<sup>4</sup>

—The solemn murmur of the unseen river far in the distance behind us—& the silence of the Lake—<sup>5</sup>

the wild betongued savage mountained upper Lake—& the pastoral River, on its right bank mirror-smooth enclosed Meadows, the steep Mountain its one precipitous huge Bank!<sup>6</sup>

What an effect of the Shadows on the water! / —On the left the conical Shadow, On the right a square of splendid Black, all the area & intermediate a mirror reflecting dark & sunny Cloud / —<sup>7</sup>

before me—O God, what a scene.—the foreground a sloping wood, sloping down to the River & meadows, the serpent River beyond the River & the wood meadows terminated by Melbreak walled by the Melbreak.<sup>8</sup>

how beautifully the river winds between this Hill & the ridge that runs up between the vales into Threlkeld ... From this point I hear swelling & sinking a murmur—is it of water? or is it of falling screes?—Fine columns of misty sunshine sailing slowly over the crags.<sup>9</sup>

but (O God) the river that runs across the vales, & that beautiful bridge just seen over the bottom of the ridge ... the Trees by the side of the river near it!<sup>10</sup>

What is especially interesting about these passages—others like them could be cited, not just from the Notebooks, but from the letters and early poetry and prose pieces as well—is that each contains details strongly reminiscent of the landscape of “Kubla Khan.” Here are the all-important “serpent river,” shadows on the water, “enclosed” meadows, a murmur of far off rapids, a Gentleman's house or a castle seen in the

distance, sloping woods, “savage” places. There is no “mighty fountain,” but there is the River Greta “shooting its waters,” and there is the pulsating “Eddy-rose.” Other entries have cascades and bursting waterfalls.

I do not mean to suggest that the landscape of “Kubla Khan” is a confection of these and similar Notebook entries; they were written in 1799, and Coleridge gives 1797 as the date of composition of the poem (though it may have been as late as 1799). What I do suggest is, first of all, that a landscape strikingly similar to that found in the poem had been of obsessive importance to Coleridge for many years, both before and after writing the poem, and second, that aspects of that famous setting scattered through the Notebooks and elsewhere point to the existence of an ur-landscape underlying all of them, of which the most glamorous, or idealized, version is the one found in “Kubla Khan.”

Where should we turn to find that first landscape, parent of all the others, the initial Xanadu? Probably not in the books of travel listed by Lowes as among those read by Coleridge in 1796 or 1797. These might conceivably have triggered the poem, but not generated it; it is much more likely that they would simply have stirred memories of a much earlier and more daemonic setting. The same can be said of the poetical romances of Southey and Landor and others so carefully examined by Elizabeth Schneider. While these works presumably played a part in building up the atmosphere and some of the incidental imagery in the poem, they didn't generate the primary landscape itself; that, I want to show, had been in Coleridge's mind years before he had read them.

But Coleridge himself, in his early poetry (as Marshall Suther has noticed in *Visions of Xanadu*) makes it clear where we should look for that original landscape: in the Devonshire countryside of his early childhood around Ottery St. Mary, with its sunny fields, wooded hills, its Vicarage full of sun and shadow, and (especially) its meandering river, described in “To the River Otter”:

Dear native Brook! wild Streamlet of the West!  
    How many various-fated years have past,  
    What happy and what mournful hours, since  
        last  
I skimm'd the smooth thin stone along thy breast,  
Numbering its light leaps! yet so deep imprest  
Sink the sweet scenes of childhood, that mine eyes  
    I never shut amid the sunny ray,  
But straight with all their tints thy waters rise,  
    Thy crossing plank, thy marge with willows  
        grey,  
And bedded sand that vein'd with various dyes  
Gleam'd through thy bright transparency! On my way,  
    Visions of Childhood! oft have ye beguil'd  
Lone manhood's cares, yet waking fondest sighs:  
    Ah! that once more I were a careless Child!

(1796; *Poems*, p. 48)

The last three lines were mere patchwork, added when Coleridge took the other eleven bodily from the much earlier “Lines on an Autumnal Evening” (1793). But the greeting of the stream is convincing. And three other images—the skipping stone, the crossing plank, the veins of sand on the river bottom—are genuine touches of excitement, beautifully evoking what had clearly begun to be for him a sacred river along whose banks and on whose neighboring hills he had roamed, a young Kubla, planning future empires.

In “Lines on an Autumnal Evening,” a divine maiden, plainly the muse of poetic inspiration, appears to him in his “dear native haunts.” There is, once more, a “placid,” “meek,” “slow,” stream, “smoothing through fertile fields” as if under a spell. At the end comes a poignant (and thoroughly period) comparison of the evening sky

to the fading of his hopes. By 1793 Coleridge was already “clustering” a meandering river, fertile fields, bowers, secluded grotts of pleasure, a maid of poetic inspiration, his own faded powers and hopes—all of them, of course, key elements of the famous later poem.

“Songs of the Pixies” (also 1793), tells how a “youthful Bard,” standing as usual close to a rushing river, is plunged in reverie on reading the names of certain vanished persons (“ancestors”?) which he finds carved on the walls of a cavern. He is roused from his gloomy trance by the “soothing witcheries” of the pixies who twine “faery garlands” around his head. Five or so years later, Kubla Khan, similarly rapt, will stand in a similar landscape, musing on ancestors, listening to distant voices, not far from a rushing river. But this time no pixies come to wake him from his trance. The Abyssinian maid, whose singing could have done so, has vanished as has the memory of her music; in which case Kubla, trapped in the poem, inaccessibly, undisturbably, will not wake from his trance at all, but go on standing by the river forever and never enter his sunny dome again.

The Abyssinian maid of “Kubla Khan” and the pixies’ “goddess of Night” have interesting points in common. The goddess (called “Mother of wildly-working dreams” and “Queen of Solemn Thought”) Coleridge associates with such mental states or powers as fancy, reverie, dream, imagination, mystical trance. Like the night sky she is both black and brilliant: round her “raven brow / Heaven’s lucent roses glow.” The Abyssinian maid of “Kubla Khan” is also black, and possesses supernatural powers that make possible the building of poems and pleasure domes. She is clearly a version of the earlier ebony goddess; and both are versions of the black muse of *Il Penseroso*,

Whose saintly visage is too bright  
To hit the sense of human sight  
And therefore to our weaker view  
O’erlaid with black, staid Wisdom’s hue.

In any case, an obsessively recurrent landscape, with meandering stream, sunny meadows, hill bearing an important or majestic building, deep woods, a haunted or supernatural atmosphere, and a maid of divine significance, turns up repeatedly in Coleridge’s early poetry—earlier, in fact, than the instances we have just been looking at would suggest. The very early sonnet “Life” (1784), for instance, opens with a poet brooding “Where native Otter sports his scanty stream.” He climbs a hill slowly, right to the top, where suddenly a vast scene, “Wood, Meadow, verdant Hill, and dreary Steep,” opens out below him in a breathtaking panorama. His eye is “ravish’d,” and he dedicates himself and his life with these words:

May this (I cried) my course through Life portray!  
New scenes of Wisdom may each step display,  
.....And thought suspended lie in rapture’s blissful trance!

(*Poems*, pp. 11-12)

The poem is more than a dedication of Coleridge-to-be. It is an incarnation, and dedication, of a much earlier Coleridge, “the inspired charity boy” of Charles Lamb’s reminiscence (“Logician, Metaphysician, Bard!”) who even as a school boy had seemed to view all life panoramically, as if from a hilltop. It reaches even further back, to “Coleridge the talker,” who at the age of nine had astonished members of his father’s circle with his eloquence and knowledge; and back still further, to the six-year-old child who devoured all the fairy tales and books of marvels he could get his hands on till his father had to put a stop to it. The image of a youth high on a hilltop in the act of discovering his life’s meaning, vowing to dedicate himself to some noble end, seems in fact perfectly to express one of the central impulses of Coleridge’s intellectual history—an enraptured lifelong quest for encyclopedic or panoramic knowledge.

Such meanings are not, of course, inherent in landscapes. But they are not merely read into them arbitrarily, either. A landscape can become “charged” with meaning when it has been the setting in which some human crisis has been lived out, or some personal breakthrough experienced. The boy Wordsworth climbs down a hill to discover at the bottom a decaying gibbet, with the name, or the initials, of the murderer who had been hanged there still carved in the turf nearby. He flees back up the hill in horror, and the quite ordinary scene he finds at the top—a naked pool, a girl with a pitcher, a beacon on a hilltop—seems, years later, to be bathed for him in a “sublime” radiance (*The Prelude*, XII, 225-66).

Had not Tom Poole asked Coleridge in 1797 for an autobiographical sketch we would have no knowledge of events in Coleridge's early life comparable to the above incident in the life of Wordsworth. We have from Coleridge's own hand, however, a detailed account of one such incident that is extremely interesting in the present context. It is too long to give here in full, but we may risk abridgement since it is likely that most Coleridge scholars will be quite familiar with it. In his seventh or eighth year, after a violent quarrel with his brother Frank the young Coleridge

ran away, to a hill at the bottom of which the Otter flows—about one mile from Ottery.—There I stayed; my rage died away; but my obstinacy vanquished my fears—& taking out a little shilling book which had, at the end, morning & evening prayers, I very devoutly repeated them—thinking *at the same time* with inward & gloomy satisfaction, how miserable my Mother must be! ... I watched the Calves in the fields beyond the river. It grew dark—and I fell asleep—it was towards the latter end of October—and it proved a dreadful stormy night—/ I felt the cold in my sleep, and dreamt that I was pulling a blanket over me, & actually pulled over me a dry thorn bush, which lay on the hill—in my sleep I had rolled from the top of the hill to within three yards of the River, which flowed by the unfenced edge of the bottom ... Several men & all the boys were sent to ramble around & seek me—in vain! My mother was almost distracted—and at ten o'clock at night I was *cry'd* by the crier in Ottery, and in two villages near it—with a reward offered for me.—No one went to bed—indeed, I believe, half the town were up all one night! ... I saw the Shepherds & Workmen at a distance—and cried out so faintly, that it was impossible to hear me 30 yards off—and there I might have lain & died—for I was now almost given over, the ponds & even the river near which I was lying, having been dragged.—But by good luck Sir Stafford Northcote ... came so near that he heard my crying ... I remember, & shall never forget my father's face as he looked upon me while I lay in the servant's arms—so calm, and the tears stealing down his face: for I was the child of his old age.—My Mother, as you may suppose, was outrageous with joy ... I was put to bed—and recovered in a day or so—but I was certainly injured—For I was weakly, & subject to the ague for many years after.<sup>11</sup>

A landscape that has been the scene of events as remarkable as these is virtually certain to remain charged with significance for the person who experienced them. Commonplace objects in the scene will retain an unusual power to evoke states of feeling that had accompanied the original events—pride, dread, shame, joy, dejection, whatever they may have been. And because they evoke such feelings in a purified form (liberated from the former demands for action) such objects will become sacred objects, the entire scene the place where the gods are, or were (as of course will other scenes that resemble the primal one sufficiently to awaken it). Treasured in memory, it will acquire mythic status, a place where great acts occurred, great issues were faced, fundamental solutions worked out: the formulaic place.

The extent to which Coleridge may have shaped or idealized this incident (the only one from his childhood he chose to preserve in this way) we can never know. It may be of some importance, however, to remember that he was describing it expressly for Tom Poole, his principal benefactor, to whom often in his letters he presented himself in a pathetic, or a heroic, light, at times as the victim of cruel misunderstandings. It is tempting also to ask whether the whole event may not be doing duty for other earlier related events, attitudes,

or impulses—epitomizing them, in a kind of heroic paradigm. A child of eight years who runs away from home to spend a long and terrifying night alone on a cold hilltop a mile or so from his village, while being all the while called for by parents who love him, undoubtedly has other reasons for staying there than the mere wish to avoid being punished if he should give in and go home. The entire incident reeks of deeper motivations: self-fulfillment, perhaps. Or even self-invention.

The youngest in a family of fourteen children, Samuel had early become the most powerful child in the home in the sense of having made himself from a very early age the favorite of his parents. This was a privileged position which he would not have relinquished without a struggle. It was also one that would be constantly under challenge by any of his brothers who felt they had been displaced by him. As indeed they had. He would live in a kingdom of vigilant tensions, surrounded by rivals. At the cost of much brotherly affection, he seems to have maintained his princely status, however, at length building about himself (in a way that might easily remind one of Kubla's walled retreat) a sunny solitude of books, fantasies, dreams:

At six years old I remember to have read Belisarius, Robinson Crusoe, & Philip Quarle [Quarll]—and then I found the Arabian Nights' entertainments—one tale of which (*a tale of a man who was compelled to seek for a pure virgin*) made so deep an impression on me (I had read it in the evening while my Mother was mending stockings) that *I was haunted by spectres, whenever I was in the dark*—and I distinctly remember the anxious & fearful eagerness, with which I used to watch the window, in which the books lay—& *whenever the Sun lay upon them*, I would seize it, carry it by the wall, & bask, & read [my italics].<sup>12</sup>

The happiest hours of his early childhood, possibly of his whole life, were those spent with his beloved books, by a sunny wall, reading romances of heroes on wonderful adventures. Paradoxically, the same books also had the power of inducing nightly terrors; it became necessary to develop a counter-rite of waiting for the sun's rays to fall on the bookshelf before daring to open the dangerous, marvelous pages. Such a mixture of terror and pleasure, the stuff of dreams, is perfectly capable of transforming the milieu in which it occurs into “a savage place, holy and enchanted,” in the words of the famous poem. It would only be natural if, as he sat by the wall in the warm sunshine poring over the charmed volumes, the family Vicarage at Ottery St. Mary should become, in certain very basic respects, a sunny palace for its gifted inhabitant. It might be equally natural if it should turn up twenty years later, elegiacally transformed, as the sunny pleasure dome of “Kubla Khan.” At any rate, thinking of that home, and the whole setting in which Coleridge grew up—a gifted child, dream- and book-oriented, in a milieu charged both with anxiety and bliss, the charmed scenery around Ottery St. Mary with its valley, meadow, woody hill, and winding river—it is tempting to discover the initial outlines of the landscape and the sources of most of the atmosphere that were to reappear, heightened and transformed, years later, in “Kubla Khan.”

The quarrel that flared between Coleridge and “Brother Frank,” in which the family “dreamer” suddenly became a figure of violent action, is chiefly significant because of what it occasioned: the first of those prodigious Agonies-in-the-Garden so familiar to readers of Coleridge's letters and Notebooks, of which two of the most impressive nightwatch poems in the language, “Dejection: an Ode” and “Frost at Midnight,” are formal versions (*public* private meditations) and “The Ancient Mariner” an extended ballad treatment. That intimate, urgent voice, a special blend of earnestness, eagerness, dismay, came into existence on a hill just outside Ottery St. Mary one cold night in October 1780, as the eight-year-old boy was tossed to and fro on seas of self-accusation and self-exoneration. It is not difficult to imagine probable details of that night: hearing now and then through the darkness and gusty wind voices “from far” calling to him, listening to the “tumult” of the Otter along its rapids, thinking of his searching mother, imagining—possibly hearing—a “woman wailing,” waking in the cold dead of night an object of infinite pity wrapped in a blanket of thorns; in the morning, waking again to find himself no longer on the hilltop that had been his temple, so to speak, or fortress-tower, but down at the bottom only a few feet away from the river that might have swallowed him in his sleep but that had spared him instead (his river of rivers, his Alpha of all rivers); being rescued by a late

searcher and returned to his parents who received with joy and forgiveness the terrible hero who in only a few years would become the subtlest introspective psychologist and (for a while at least) the profoundest poet of nightmare of his time.

Several themes and images of suffering in Coleridge's mature work seem obviously related to the events of that night: a given-up-for-lost mariner "alone on a wide, wide sea"; a melancholy prince in a haunted solitude; visions of lost Edens; desolate landscapes; skies of storm; mournful voices; hope in a context of despair; the need for atonement and redemption through forgiveness and love. Memories of that night could spring up as much as twenty years later, as in the case of the following *Notebook* entry. (Coleridge is at Keswick, his muse quite silent—"for five months past my mind has been strangely shut up"<sup>13</sup>—his domestic life in ruins.)

Tuesday night, July 19, 1803—Intensely hot day—left off a waistcoat, & for yarn wore silk stockings—about 9 o'clock had unpleasant chilliness—heard a noise which I thought Derwent's in sleep—listening anxiously, I found it was a Calf bellowing—instantly came on my mind that night I slept out at Ottery—& the Calf *in the field across the river whose lowing had so deeply impressed me*—chill + child + Calf—lowing probably the rivers Greta and Otter.<sup>14</sup>

My argument, boiled down, is this: the landscapes that most excited Coleridge as poet and note-maker seem always to be those that recapitulate features of the countryside around Ottery St. Mary; one early experience in particular, a night spent alone in his eighth year on a hill outside his village had been sufficiently traumatic to leave the whole setting permanently charged; "Kubla Khan" may be seen as a glamorized evocation, two decades later, of that "holy and enchanted" landscape. It is an intriguing coincidence (for Coleridge almost certainly did not know modern Greek), that the word *Xanadu*—his variation of the *Xamdu* (or *Xaindu*) of his sources—should be the subjunctive form of the verb *Xanado*, and mean *could I (that I might) see again*.<sup>15</sup>

## II

On the other hand, the poem is not called "Xanadu," but "Kubla Khan." And as it stands, it is Kubla's poem. He dominates it. His commanding position in the title, his immediate appearance in line one, the lordly "did ... decree," are enough to make everything that follows directly dependent upon him, effects, so to speak, of his character. Gardens, meadows, forests, palace, fountain, sacred river, all are his, absolutely. You feel you know a great deal about him just by thinking about them. He is an induced presence, like the Hamlet of Shakespeare, strongly realized before being seen. When he decrees something, things start happening—workmen spring into action, walls get built, gardens spout sinuous rills, stately pleasure domes go up in the middle of wildernesses. And it is just because one knows this kind of thing about him that it is so puzzling when he is not found where you would expect to find him—in his chambers of state, or somewhere in the palace environs, in the adjoining courtyard, for instance, or in the formal garden area (where Coleridge's sources almost invariably locate him). He is in none of these places. It is only after a bit of searching that you do, in fact, get a glimpse of him and then only by implication—standing alone, at a considerable distance from the palace, close by the river at a spot where the shadow of the pleasure dome can be seen floating on the water, not too far from where rapids burst into an enormous cavern.

That Kubla should be there alone is definitely odd. No princely retinue; no attendants, companions, foreign ambassadors, ministers of state, court maidens; no one but himself. No activity on the river, either, or in the fields, or in the surrounding forests. No indication that there will be any, or that there ever has been. It is a perfect solitude. The only other presences are ghosts—voices of ancestors that emanate from the "tumult" of the waters. Were it not for those voices, you might perhaps think of him as meditating there; or as charmed by the view. But considering that family and those ancestors, the most despotic and violent of the Mongol dynasties, it is easier to suppose that he is being prompted, or summoned. Or, for that matter, accused.

We are not told what wars the voices are warning him of, or reminding him of, or summoning him to, what sorts of battles there will be, where they will be fought, or against whom. All we know is that Kubla hears “from far” voices that must evoke a torturing contrast between life in the pleasure dome and life on the tented field. What is Kubla's reaction to these voices? If such a question cannot be answered, still it can be turned over a bit. Is he on the point of obeying them? Does the fact that they speak to him of war, not peace, make them “voices of conscience,” reminders of things like public service, official duties, military conquest, and so forth? Do they make life in Xanadu seem a kind of truant life? Is Kubla remembering some other life outside the walls, some other self than the palace self? If he should be lured away from Xanadu by the voices, does he think it will be only for a little while? Once outside the walls, will he look back in nostalgia and regret at the palace he has left behind? Or will he ignore the voices entirely and go back to his pleasant residence? His glance falls (let us say) on the dome's shadow on the water, rests there, and he is pulled two ways: one to the ancestral wars, the other to the pleasure dome. And there the poem leaves him, suspended between two worlds. Or so one might picture it; the exact details aren't really important. What is important is seeing Kubla as a static figure, alienated, alone in a haunted solitude, listening to voices—important because this Kubla and this setting have almost nothing to do with those found in Coleridge's main sources, *Purchas His Pilgrimage* and *Purchas His Pilgrimes*.

Purchas's own source, *The Most Notable and Famous Travels of Marcos Paulus*, translated into English by John Frampton in 1579, pictures “Cublay” as a vigorous prince who has great aptitude both for courtly pleasures and official business, and who prides himself on having the blood of Genghis Khan in his veins. In *Pilgrimage*, “the Grand Can” is regularly shown executing some princely function—presiding at communal meals, festivities, sacrificial rites, or other important events; or he is hunting, or making war—there are many sudden expeditions. He is a keen military strategist: “he not only inherited what the former [Cans] had conquered, but in the sixteenth year of his raigne subdued in a manner the rest of [those parts of] the world.”<sup>16</sup> Purchas describes him as “of mean stature, of countenance white, red, and beautiful. He had foure wives which kept several courts, the least of which contained at least ten thousand persons. He had many concubines.”<sup>17</sup> *Pilgrimes* is even more specific: Cublai is “twentie seven yeares old,<sup>18</sup> and ruling the people with great wisdom and gravitie. He is a valiant man, exercised in Armes, strong in bodie, and of a prompt minde for the performance of matters, before he attained to the dignitie of the Empire—he often showed himselfe a valiante Souldier in the warres.”<sup>19</sup> His ceaseless palace building is often noticed by Purchas (in *Pilgrimes*) and by Marco Polo; from the latter we learn of Cublai's sensible practice of visiting all parts of his empire on an annual basis to check on local governments in person. We learn further that he needed “a marvellous goodly palace” at each stopping place “to lodge him & his Court when he cometh to that Citie.” Clearly, he had a taste for “imperial delights,” but there is nothing in any of these accounts to suggest the indolent, abstracted, solitary prince of Coleridge's poem.

As for Cublai's residence at Xanadu, *Pilgrimage* speaks of “a stately palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall.”<sup>20</sup> The grounds are called remarkable for their fertility and park-like beauty. Marco Polo, writing of what he had personally observed, goes into fuller detail:

a very fine Palace, the rooms of which are all guilt and painted with figures of men and beasts and birds and with a variety of trees and flowers, all executed with such exquisite art that you regard them with delight and astonishment. Round this palace a wall is built, inclosing a compass of sixteen miles, and inside the Park there are fountains and rivers and brooks, and beautiful meadows, with all kinds of wild animals (excluding such as are of ferocious nature).<sup>21</sup>

Nowhere in Purchas's or Marco Polo's accounts is there any hint of Coleridge's enchanted solitude. Instead, what we read of is people buying, selling, eating, working, trading, going and coming, or merely milling about. Without fail there is a river that “winds” through the grounds of the palaces, plied by barges and other commercial vessels, and which in some instances “runneth his course into the Ocean Sea.” By contrast, the

palace and grounds of Coleridge's poem are empty and still; the river hasn't so much as a single sail. One could be looking at a scene from which all the inhabitants had fled, possibly ages ago. In both Purchas and Marco Polo, Cublai is normally pictured hearing legal cases, pronouncing on them, dispatching messengers to foreign courts, attending lectures, studying and promoting the arts and sciences, listening to reports of the public works commissions, inspecting his stables, or (best of all) going to or returning from the hunt. There is always something going on. Coleridge's Kubla, on the other hand (what we can see, or deduce, of him), is utterly aloof, his Xanadu a retreat, more hideaway than imperial court. Both he and the setting have been almost totally transformed. How are we to account for these transformations?<sup>22</sup>

### III

There is probably always some identification, not necessarily conscious, between a writer and his subject. The crucial passage in Purchas that touched off "Kubla Khan" may imply a personal or situational analogy of some kind between Coleridge, "poet-philosopher," and Kubla Khan, Oriental monarch. Is the poem perhaps a medal with two sides, one stamped Coleridge, the other Kubla Khan? The two figures appear to be connected, although they face in different directions and have corresponding but reversed dilemmas. Each is on the point of betraying his true vocation for another one—Kubla, man of action par excellence, deserting affairs of state for those of the pleasure dome, Coleridge his career as philosophic poet for that of intellectual explorer outside the walls, i.e. as professional lecturer, journalist, literary and political theorist, religious thinker. Both are seriously concerned with making and administering empires (civilizations), with their various divisions, provinces, departments, histories, traditions, manners, etc. Both are concerned with bringing speech to speechless tribes and with unifying the life of the mind within their borders. Both possess a vision of a complete empire, not merely practical knowledge of its parts.

Serious poets feel genuine responsibility for the civilization to which they belong. They want to know how it evolved, what moves it, what may happen to it if it continues along its present course, what it might yet become. But after a certain point, allegiance to poetry must prevail over alternative interests. In Coleridge's case, as has often been noted, the claims of poetry and the claims of speculation were uniquely balanced. ("I hope," he wrote Poole in February 1801, "that Poetry & Philosophy will not neutralize each other & leave me an inert mass."<sup>23</sup>) For years he devoted more and more of his energies to social and philosophic thought and analysis, and made longer and longer excursions into theology, history, criticism, enlisting his powers in the service of a lower encyclopedism until what were once short field trips outside the walls of "Xanadu" became full-scale expeditions, journeys of settlement. From about 1800 to the end of his life in 1834, he applied himself increasingly to the preparation of what he came to describe as his "great work on the Logos, Divine and Human, on which I have set my Heart and hope to ground my ultimate reputation,"<sup>24</sup> a work that was, in the words of W. J. Bate, "nothing less than a new *Summa* of theology, morals, psychology, logic, the sciences, and the arts, or rather of a series of works that together might make up a new *Summa*."<sup>25</sup> Coleridge loved to speak of it in architectural terms: "What a Hope, Promise, Impulse you are to me!" he writes Thomas Alsop in 1820, "in my present efforts to realize my past labors, and by building up the Temple, the shaped Stones, Beams, Pillars, Yea, the graven Ornaments & connecting Clamps of which have been piled up by me only in too great abundance."<sup>26</sup>

Such a statement (the letters and *Notebooks* contain others like it) makes it easy to picture an ideal Coleridge, the Coleridge of intention, Wordsworth's "most *wonderful* man I have ever known," as a serene and powerful ruler, a veritable Kubla Khan, dwelling in a palace of philosophy, science, and art at the center of a marvelous landscape of the mind. It wouldn't be a false picture of Coleridge; it would simply be a clarified one, stripped of everything that doesn't, in the end, really matter and that had only got in the way of the ideal Coleridge that did. It might even seem that this, after all, is what "Kubla Khan" is essentially about—Coleridge's intellectual "temple," or *Logosophia*, on which he had "set his heart," glimpsed from afar as a "stately pleasure dome" that was fated never to be brought to completion. It might seem a satisfying reading—if dates and other factors weren't definitely against it. For even if we don't accept Coleridge's "summer 1797" as the date of



composition and take instead October 1799, or even “May or June 1800” (as suggested by Elizabeth Schneider), it would surely be much too early for him to have been lamenting in a poem the failure of a philosophic career which at that date could hardly be said to have begun.

There was, however, another more important failure occurring in Coleridge's life around 1798-1800: the drying up of his poetic genius. Here would be a disaster that might fittingly be represented as loss of the power to build a bright “dome in the air.” It was, in fact, a far from unanticipated failure. He seems to have been expecting it almost from the start of his career. The early poems and letters contain a variety of complaints:

Oh! might my ill-past hours return again  
.....'Tis vain to wish, for Time has ta'en his flight—

(“Quae Nocent Docent,” 1789; *Poems*, pp. 7-8)

Then sigh and think—I too could laugh and play  
And gaily sport it on the Muse's lyre,  
Ere tyrant Pain had chased away delight,

(“Pain,” 1790, lines 11-13; *Poems*, p. 17)

O pleasant days of Hope—for ever gone!  
Could I recall you!—But that thought is vain.

(“The Gentle Look,” 1793; lines 9-10; *Poems*, p. 48)

To me hath Heaven with bounteous hand assigned  
Energetic Reason and a shaping mind ...  
.....Sloth-jaundiced all!

(“Lines on a Friend,” 1794; lines 39, 40, 43; *Poems*, p. 77)

By 1800, after his remarkable, though remarkably short, burst of poetic activity while collaborating with Wordsworth on *Lyrical Ballads*, the atony he dreaded yet had somehow half-invoked began to show in earnest: “The poet is dead in me—my imagination (or rather the Somewhat that had been imaginative) lies like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candlestick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once cloathed & mitred with Flame” (March 25, 1801).<sup>27</sup>

The loss that is lamented in Part II of “Kubla Khan” is the loss of the power to lift a work of art above mere “fancy,” loss of the constructive and unifying power which Coleridge later termed “secondary Imagination.” In “Kubla Khan,” this power is seen as dependent upon a damsel's inspired song. She plays on a dulcimer, her proper instrument,<sup>28</sup> and sings of a distant mountain, her sacred home, which she visualizes with such apparent clarity and certainty that it is almost as if she had never left it. The damsel is the soul's visionary faculty, by which we know and re-enter the eternal world. It is her singing that harmonizes the other powers of the mind and soul—imagination, reason, moral sensibility, the will. We know exactly what her song is about because Coleridge left so many glosses on it and versions of it: “Truth is one and entire, because it is *vital*”<sup>29</sup>—“all things have a life of their own and yet they are all one life”<sup>30</sup>—“He to whom all things are one, who draweth all things to one, and seeth all things in one, may enjoy true peace & rest of spirit.”<sup>31</sup>

The intuition of oneness is the soul's essential joy—the visionary instant “in which the divisions between inner and outer, between symbol and letter, between subject and object, and between objects themselves vanish and the lost connections are suddenly recaptured.”<sup>32</sup> If it is eclipsed, or becomes lost, the true relation of the mind's faculties promptly deteriorates: Reason falls to doing the work of the Understanding,

Imagination loses its power of “discovering the cause in the Effect” and becomes “Fancy,” partial truths are mistaken for the whole truth, correspondencies vanish, the universe becomes, as Coleridge wrote to Poole in October, 1797, “but a mass of little things.”<sup>33</sup> The disappearance of the maiden and her song is the failure of the visionary impulse, with the accompanying failure of the fountain of imagination. When the fountain fails, the river of unified thought and feeling starts to dry up. With the drying of that river comes an end to any plans for building above its banks stately pleasure domes of art and song. This is what the bard of Part II knows, hope though he may to the contrary. He exclaims, “I would build that dome in air / That sunny dome! those caves of ice!,” but the nostalgic repetitions belie his hopes, putting them well beyond probability of fulfillment. The poem that seemed to have begun as an epic, or perhaps as a “verse romance,” after a mere thirty-six lines changes abruptly into an elegy—not just for its own incompleteness, or for other poems of Coleridge’s that would never even get partly written, but for all unfinished poems, palaces, lives, visions, paradises: the most celebrated lines ever written on hopes that come to nothing.

“Kubla Khan,” that is to say, isn’t an unfinished, or suspended poem in the sense that “Christabel,” for example, is. It is a poem *about* suspended powers. The unfinishedness of “Kubla Khan” is integral to the theme, not a deformation of it. “Finishability,” given such a term, not failure to finish, but a longing to finish, or to have finished, is what the poem is about. In spite of its many tensions, contrasts, oppositions, though teeming with portentousness and a sense of imminent action, nothing significant happens—nothing, at least, that you can put your finger on. Significance is precisely what is withheld. If there is an action, it is that of pure expectation arrested, as in a dream, by dread.

In the view of Leslie Brisman, the interesting thing in this situation is not Coleridge’s inability to finish the poem, but his need to interrupt it—an event that also occurs, though in differing ways, in several of his other poems. The man from Porlock is an aspect of Coleridge’s self that insists upon breaking in on the act of composition to disrupt it. In Brisman’s words: “He is *the person*, as opposed to *the poet* in the poet. At best he is what makes the conversational Coleridge so personable; at worst, he is what keeps the poet from producing works like *Lycidas* ... to the extent that he is no poet this Porlock is always dumb, though in fact he can be, as Coleridge the man was, unquenchably garrulous.” And a little farther on, “If ‘Kubla Khan’ internalizes the fact of interruption and becomes, more than an interrupted poem, a poem about interruption, it does so in a manner like that by which dreams absorb the Porlocks of conscious waking life”<sup>34</sup> (as personifications of Freud’s “Daytime Worry”).

It would be easy, in other words, in ways such as these, to see “Kubla Khan” as a monument to Coleridge’s failure, involuntary or deliberate, as poet. But this would be a mistake; the poem is richer than that. Coleridge’s thought was so subtly interwoven with the deepest thought of his time that in wider perspective we can see the poem as imaging a much vaster failure, of which Coleridge’s was but a symptomatic part. The West has far from succeeded in harmonizing heart and head, desire and reason, morality and science, imagination and reason. Now that the wars prophesied by the “ancestral voices” have finally come about and the stately pleasure dome of Western civilization appears to lie in ruins, “Kubla Khan” may come to seem less a personal elegy about the failure of S. T. C. than a prophetic elegy about the failure of an entire culture. That is to say, the famous interruption of the poem may in fact have been inherent in the subject.

Yet, who knows? Perhaps no interruption, in the usual sense of intrusion, occurred at all. Perhaps the person from Porlock was expected, or even, as Brisman suggests, was sent for by Coleridge—I mean by Coleridge the 24-year-old poet, because of a poetical need, whatever the 44-year-old philosopher of the same name may have chosen to remember about the occasion. For there was another book—always, with Coleridge, there is another book—besides *Purchas His Pilgrimage* that may have been in the young poet’s thoughts that autumn night and may have served as the other parent, so to speak, of “Kubla Khan”: Andrew Baxter’s *Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* (1737). This work had interested Coleridge ever since 1795 when, as he says, he had “walked with Southey on a desperate hot summerday from Bath to Bristol with a Goose, 2 vol. of Baxter on the Immortality of the Soul, and the Giblets in my hand.”<sup>35</sup> He was still able in 1827 to say of it, “I

should not wonder if I found that Andrew had thought more on the subject of Dreams [the section “The Phaenomenon of Dreaming” runs to some 200 pages] than any other of our Psychologists, Scotch or English.”<sup>36</sup>

The main appeal of Baxter for Coleridge in 1795 would be his unabashed defense of “the spiritual principle in human life” against the materialism of Godwin, Hobbes, and Locke. “Matter, in the philosophy of the many,” Baxter writes, “has usurped the *power* of the human soul, and the power of all other living intelligent Causes.”<sup>37</sup> It is even imaginable that Coleridge had this work with him on the walk that ended at the farmhouse near Porlock, rather than the bulkier Purchas—the 2 lbs. 9 ozs. of the two Baxter volumes being about half the weight of the 1625 edition of Purchas. However that may be, Baxter had the following things to say about dreams and visions:

Again, another hath this scene presented to him in his sleep. He fancies *a person reads to him certain sentences out of a book*, and that neither the *person reading*, nor the *subject read*, are unknown to him, but that he is familiarly acquainted with both; insomuch that he knows beforehand, what the other is to read to him, and the design of the writer: and hath his remarks ready to offer upon it, as if he had perused this *visionary Author* long since. And *upon awaking*, he remembers some of the words read to him, and something of what he had to observe concerning it: *but the scene gradually disappears*; and the more he seeks to recover his own sleeping arguments, and the other's reasons, by the help of his *waking memory*, the more they are darkened by that very endeavor. One under this disappointment will be *vexed that he did not dream on, or that anything should disturb him, while he is endeavoring to catch the shy remains of his vision, or if possible, to replace himself in the same state of consciousness*.<sup>38</sup>

[Italics in original, except in last two sentences.]

A marvelous book, found and read in a dream, the contents of which, because of some trivial waking circumstance, are then lost beyond recall. Only, instead of a dream book that dissolves upon waking, why not a real book, a book of wonderful travels, *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, for instance, and “fall asleep” over it, and carry it into a dream, where it then generates a strange poem, a long one, on the life and deeds of one Cublai Can ... and have the copying-out interrupted, à la Baxter, and the rest of the poem fade away and vanish, to leave author and reader straying back and forth from book to poem, from life to dream, in search of the meaning forever after?

#### Notes

1. In *Table Talk*, ed. H. N. Coleridge, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1835), 2:87.
2. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 3 double vols. (Bollingen Series, New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 1:220-G216. Hereafter: *C. N. B.*, citing volume and entry number.
3. *C. N. B.*, 1:495.
4. *C. N. B.*, 1:495.
5. *C. N. B.*, 1:510.
6. *C. N. B.*, 1:510.
7. *C. N. B.*, 1:536.
8. *C. N. B.*, 1:537.
9. *C. N. B.*, 1:798.
10. *C. N. B.*, 1:978. Quotations from Coleridge's poetry are taken from *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London: Humphrey Milford, 1931).
11. *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (London and Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), 1:352-54. Hereafter: *C. L.*, citing volume and page.

12. *C. L.* 1:347.
13. Letter to Tom Wedgewood, September 16, 1803. Quoted in Joseph Cottle's *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1847), p. 466.
14. *C. N. B.*, 1:1416.
15. Pointed out to me by Irene Burtness.
16. *Purchas His Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages* (London, 1613), The Fourth Booke, p. 337.
17. *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, p. 353.
18. Coleridge's age in 1799.
19. *Hakluytus Postumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, by Samuel Purchas, B. D., in 20 vols. (Glasgow, 1906), vol. 11, ch. 3, p. 233.
20. *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, p. 350.
21. *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo together with The Travels of Nicolo De Conti*, ed. from the Elizabethan Translation of John Frampton by N. M. Penzer, M. A. (London: The Argonaut Press, 1929), p. 263.
22. The two best known studies of the poem, John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927) and Elizabeth Schneider's *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), do not really supply answers to this question. Lowes, clearly trapped by associationist psychology, sees the poem as a feat, essentially, of memory (Coleridge's "Fancy")—a structure of allusions fished up from Coleridge's reading by an almost mechanical unconscious mental process which Lowes equates with the work of the imagination. Elizabeth Schneider, in her classic study, views the poem as (among other things) an attempt by Coleridge to write a pseudo-oriental romance in the going style of the period. (She instances Landor's *Gebir*, Southey's *Thalaba*, and other contemporary romances, both English and continental.) The poem failed chiefly because it had begun in too densely lyrical a fashion to have been sustained and had, in the event, to be abandoned. Cogent as an "objective" explanation of why the poem is a fragment, this doesn't touch the question of why Coleridge should have altered the Purchas materials as radically as he did, and in the manner he did.
23. *C. L.*, 2:668-69. In *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969) Thomas McFarland argues that poetry and philosophy did not neutralize each other but remained mutually supportive (see especially ch. 2). This might be true of Coleridge's view of the ideal relations of these two faculties, but it hardly conforms to the facts of Coleridge's own case.
24. To John Gutch, 17 September 1815. *C. L.*, 4:585.
25. Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (New York: Collier Books, 1973), pp. 181-82.
26. *C. L.*, 5:95-96 (to John Thelwall).
27. *C. L.*, 2:714 (to William Godwin).
28. Not, of course, the modern instrument (played with two felt-headed hammers on a concert platform) of Norman Fruman's and Alethea Hayter's predilection. See Norman Fruman, *Coleridge, The Damaged Archangel* (New York: Braziller, 1971), p. 544; and Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), p. 220. According to *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, "dulcimer" originally also meant "other musical instruments common in the Elizabethan period, and according to the usage in the English Bible, Hebrew musical instruments, about which we have no sure knowledge." *Grove's*, 3rd edn., 6 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 2:107. Coleridge was clearly using the word in the more ancient "biblical" sense.
29. *C. N. B.*, 3:4251.
30. *C. L.*, 1:406.
31. *C. N. B.*, 1:876.
32. Thomas R. Frosch, *The Awakening of Albion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 97.
33. *C. L.*, 1:354.
34. Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 32-33.
35. Quoted by Kathleen Coburn in *C. N. B.*, 1 (*Notes*): 188.

36. Ibid.

37. Andrew Baxter, *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul*, 2 vols., 2nd edn. (London, 1737), 2:48.

38. Baxter, 2:228-29.

## Criticism: Edward Strickland (essay date 1981)

SOURCE: "The Topography of Initiation in 'Kubla Khan,'" *Ball State University Forum*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter, 1981, pp. 69-78.

[In the following essay, Strickland builds upon the thesis that "Kubla Khan" is a mythographic account of its own creation.]

### I

If it has become a critical commonplace that the subject of "Kubla Khan" is poetry, more specific questions of intentionality in Coleridge's symbolism remain open to debate. Does the poem speak of poetry in general or of itself in particular? Among recent interpretations, those of Suther, Shelton, Purves and Patterson suggest variations of the first alternative, while Chayes and Watson have analysed the poem in its bipartite structure as a critique of itself.<sup>1</sup> I hope to refine the second argument further by emphasizing the reflexiveness of poesis and poem in "Kubla Khan," approaching the work not so much as a fragment-cum-commentary as a mythographic account of its own creation, a psychomachia of poet and vision in process.

Since my methodology involves the hypothetical reconstruction of the poetic act, I must reconsider briefly the old questions of manner and date of composition. The critical reactions to Coleridge's problematic preface to the poem may be divided conveniently into three camps: the Lowes, the Schneider and the Hayter. In *The Road to Xanadu* Lowes, followed by the early M. H. Abrams, accepts at face value Coleridge's assertion that he "continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most profound confidence that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Schneider's argument in *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* dismisses the preface as a fiction and reads the poem as a consciously-constructed artifact, a view espoused by Norman Fruman and by others more implicitly. Robert Southey put the case of the skeptics with admirable succinctness long ago, observing that Coleridge dreamed that he dreamed.<sup>3</sup> I would take Southey's statement in a different sense, regarding Coleridge's illusion as less wilful than he infers, its agent the opium "anodyne" to which Coleridge refers in the preface, the influence of which on the poem has been studied by Alethea Hayter and Molly Lefebure. In their support stands Coleridge's less extravagant version of the poem's inception in a note to the poem in an autograph copy: "This fragment, with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, *in a sort of Reverie*, brought on by two grains of opium."<sup>4</sup> I find myself less receptive than Lowes to what I take to be the poetic license of the preface and less skeptical than Professor Schneider. I do not believe Coleridge spun the preface as well as the poem out of his entrails, yet I do remain incredulous of the existence of the unknown "person on business from Porlock" whose detention of Coleridge "for above an hour" curtailed the "transcription" of the remaining 150 to 250 lines of a sleep-dictated poem. I can only take this person as a kind of emblem of *deflatus*, the diurnal consciousness or Keatsian Habitual Self of the psychomachia of inspiration, just as the composition or dictation of "two or three hundred lines" may be a metaphor—albeit a self-aggrandizing one—for the sense of poetic capability experienced in the opium reverie.

The argument over dating has been similarly involved. The published preface names "the summer of the year 1797." The retirement "to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton," linked to the Lloyd controversy of May 1798 in a Coleridge note, caused the editors James Dykes Campbell and E. H. Coleridge, and later Lawrence Hanson, to take that as the date of composition.<sup>5</sup> Schneider has argued for the fall of 1799 or a later

date on the radically different premise noted above. The Coleridge note quoted earlier dates his “sort of Reverie” in “the fall of the year 1797,” which Earl Leslie Griggs accepts on the further evidence of a letter to John Thelwall on October 14, 1797, in which Coleridge speaks of a temporary absence from Stowey as well as his concern with the “counterfeit infinit[ies]” of the sublime and of opium (*CL*, I, 349-50).<sup>6</sup> Between the two most probable dates, October 1797 and May 1798, *The Ancient Mariner* was written, so our choice of a date of composition for “Kubla Khan” is important in establishing a Coleridgean chronology, particularly for developmental readings of his corpus. Along with the external evidence, the terms of the visionary struggle as I shall outline them lead me to side with Griggs, and to view the composition of “Kubla Khan” as an initiation-rite for Coleridge into a new mode of vision, which he was to explore further in the ballad-narratives.

The springboard for the poem was the sentence from *Purchas his Pilgrimage* which Coleridge misquotes in his preface and which I quote from Lowes: “In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightfull Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be removed from place to place.”<sup>7</sup> After reading this passage, Coleridge tells us, he fell into his sleep or opium-revery. The resultant poem, “in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness or effort,” transformed the sketch of Purchas to

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.

(11. 1-11)

Apart from the minor changes of “sixteene miles” to “twice five” there are three adaptations worthy of note: the exclusion of “all sorts of beasts of chase and game,” the metamorphosis of the portable “house of pleasure” into a stable edifice, and the addition of the river to the site. The Alph, of course, develops into the central unifying feature of the variegated landscape, but what is the consequence of the other changes?

Along with the persistence of pre-Romantic Orientalism in the “incense-bearing trees” I would suggest that in his first stanza Coleridge has domesticated the Tartar palace at least partially in terms of the eighteenth-century picturesque. The exclusion of the animals of the chase adds to the tranquillity but detracts from the vitality of Purchas's Xanadu, as Coleridge devotes his attention to flora rather than fauna. The stately dome is closer to the manorhouse than the moveable feasting-place of the seventeenth-century author. What we have in the first stanza of “Kubla Khan” is the beginning of a perfectly acceptable late-eighteenth-century Oriental idyll à l'anglaise, its topography comparable to, say, Collins' *Persian Eclogues*. The picturesque “variety” of the ancient forests' “Enfolding sunny spots of greenery” is no more an example of the Coleridgean reconciliation of opposites than of the *concordia discors* it shares in common with as un-Romantic a poem as *Windsor Forest*. The “sinuous rills” are contextually less evocative of serpentine allure than of rococo ogees and the “intricacy” of the picturesque described by Gilpin and Price.

The iconography of Xanadu has often been discussed in terms of the emblematology of Romantic vision, with critical evasion of the geographical and psychic borders between the palace grounds of the Khan and their

visionary hinterlands. What I want to emphasize here, consequently, following a lead of Watson,<sup>8</sup> is that the grounds are themselves remnants of a previous age, monuments of the picturesque, and the attack on their walls is an historic event not for thirteenth-century Oriental politics but for nineteenth-century English poetry, because the object of the assault is Coleridge's immature sensibility with its store of received aesthetic wisdom. If Xanadu is a Palace of Art, it shares the fundamental limitation of Tennyson's later edifice—it simply excludes too much reality. In the chronicle of his Palace Tennyson delineated his poetic struggle between escapist aestheticism and social commitment, abandoning the Palace finally to work out his version of the Victorian Compromise. For Coleridge the struggle is between the picturesque and the daemonic, and the daemons, we find, have Xanadu surrounded almost from the start.

I use the term “daemonic” psychologically rather than traditionally, not with Patterson's reference to the pre-Christian daemonology with which Coleridge was familiar, or with Beyer's reference to Wieland.<sup>9</sup> I mean by the term, rather, the immanent or subliminal preternatural. The use of the term “Xanadu” is itself problematic, since the word may be used to denote either the region or the palace and its grounds. For clarity's sake I will use its second meaning, following the notable precedent of *Citizen Kane*. Xanadu, then, is the estate bordered by the Alph and the “walls and towers” built by Kubla. I was tempted to say “on one side by the Alph,” but the imagery of line 6 (“girdled round”) and the “meandering” motion of the river suggest not a rectilinear but roughly circular or ovoid border. “Girdled round” further points, in conjunction with “fertile ground,” to the internal tensions between organic energy and picturesque artifice in Xanadu. The marmoreal quality of the stately palace is achieved at the price of constriction of the chthonic. The primordial forests are cultivated or acculturated into chiaroscuro enclosures of “sunny spots,” titanism diminished to *fête champêtre*. One cannot imagine the pleasures for which the dome was designed, however hedonistic, as anything but tasteful. The magic of Kubla, who God-like establishes his Edenic retreat by “decree,” is not unlike the landscaper Capability Brown's in *The Task*:

Th'omnipotent magician, Brown, appears!  
 .....Woods vanish, hills subside, and vallies rise:  
 And streams, as if created for his use,  
 Pursue the track of his directing wand,  
 Sinuous or straight, now rapid and now slow,  
 Now murm'ring soft, now roaring in cascades—  
 Ev'n as he bids ...

(III, 765-66, 774-80).<sup>10</sup>

The closest analogue to the imaginative realm sprung from Kubla's crown is James Thomson's *Castle of Indolence*. The *Castle*, constructed, Thomson tells us, from roughly 1734 to 1748, antedates *Xanadu* by half a century. Coleridge described the work as "that most lovely Poem" in a letter to George Dyer in March 1795 (*CL*, I, 154). *Indolence*, who is called by Thomson a "wizard," and "enchanter" and "that villain Archimage" (the poem borrows Spenser's stanza as well), builds his castle "In lovely dale, fast by a river's side, / With woody hill o'er hill encompassed round" (I, i)<sup>11</sup>—a Beulah-world gone bad, its pitifully harmless inhabitants, who comprise an unheroic catalogue in stanzas lvi-lxxxvii of Canto I, succumbing to the fate of Blake's Har and Heva as well as others more Hogarthian. Thomson's opening description parallels Coleridge's in several important details:

Was nought around but images of rest:  
Sleep-soothing groves, and quiet lawns between;  
And flowery beds that slumbrous influence keſt,  
From poppies breathed; and beds of pleaſant green,  
Where never yet was creeping creature ſeen.  
Meantime unnumbered glittering ſteamlets  
  played,  
And hurlèd everywhere their waters ſheen;

(I, iii, v)

Thomson's arch-villain meets his nemesis in the Knight of Art and Industry, the allegorical quester and redemptive Sir Guyon of Canto II, who with a wave of his disenchanting wand reveals "The pure quick streams" as "marshy puddles" (II, lxxvii). Coleridge in turn finds liberation from Xanadu by a journey upstream to the source of the Alph beyond the palace walls, on the haunted hillside we may imagine looking over them. The wailing woman proves a necessary angel, however fallen, her cries the lament of the Muse calling the poet to take up his visionary role by abandoning the specious idyllism of the Khan's estate.

Were then made for me; bond unknown to me  
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
A dedicated spirit. On I walked  
In blessedness, which even yet remains.

The experience is epiphanic, as is emphasized by the juxtaposition of the “melody of birds” and “empyrean light” with the “aimless prattle” and “tapers glistening” of the all-night party he has left. Coleridge's movement from Xanadu to hillside, first to second stanzas, is even more dramatic, the counterpoint made vivid in the opening exclamation and those that follow. The recognition that steals upon Wordsworth silently seizes hold of Coleridge's imagination violently:

40



(11. 13-16)

(ll. 25-30)

Surely what is most emphatic in these lines is the extent to which the Alph is not of the daylight world of the Khan. Its end, as its source, is subterranean. The chasm from which it springs extends to the womb of the underworld that gives the fountain birth. The caverns, more explicitly, are “measureless.” A contrast is drawn between the brief course of the Alph through Xanadu and the unplumability of the caverns that are its birthplace and grave. The sacredness of the river is not in that part of it which greets the eye but that which is hidden from it.

The death of the river is as energetic as its birth. Although it approaches a condition of ultimate immobility, it sinks underground with a “tumult” that recalls the fury of the fountain. The parallels counterbalance the contrasts between the two sites. They are more like each other than either resembles the “meandering” river of Xanadu, where the Alph seems in its “mazy motion” to be simultaneously resisting and risking transformation into a great “sinuous rill.” Yet the Alph transcends Xanadu even as it appears to be subsumed temporarily by it. It is a messenger to court, a bearer of the voices terrifying the emperor with their autonomy, which dwarfs his power and the world he has constructed.

Coleridge's voyage down river in the process-poem continues his confrontation with the subliminal nature of vision—and of voice, and one must add—for the river from beginning to end is less a visual image than a daemonic song, a frontier of preternatural sound as opposed to Kubla's defensive walls and towers. If the fountain embodies the spontaneity of the tempest of afflatus, the Dantean lifeless ocean contrariwise demonstrates the invulnerability of the vanished vision to the assaults of the will, which is of course the theme of the final stanza. The visionary journey-by-water, like more naturalistic ones from “The Seafarer” to James Dickey's *Deliverance*, is an initiation rite, in this case a poetic one, a development of the daemonic marriage at the chasm. The tension between Xanadu and Alph is historically a battle between sensibility and romanticism, but more fundamentally it is a Coleridgean psychomachia, the struggle between the youthful poet of the picturesque—“This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” Coleridge's best poem to date, had been written only three months earlier—and the visionary artist whose masterworks in their disproportionate influence on the preternatural romance rivalled that of Wordsworth on the complementary strain of Romantic landscape-meditation. Coleridge, like his godson the Poet of *Alastor*, is baptized into visionary capability in his river-voyage. In *The Ancient Mariner* this metaphor is extended in the sea voyage of the poet-surrogate. In both cases (as in *Alastor*) the movement is away from the given world, whether the stability of the Mariner's kirk or the inherited Elysium of Xanadu.

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!

(ll. 31-36)

This interpretation of the symbolism of the dome may be clarified further by contrasting it to the prevailing view, as articulated by Max Schulz. Schulz regards Kubla's dome as a metonym of the “perfectly balanced existence” of Xanadu: “Rearing above river, garden, and caves of ice, it both dominates Xanadu and combines within its dimensions the flux of the antithetical parts of Xanadu—the mundane and the transcendent, the temporal and the eternal. Its echoing walls resound with the ‘mingled measure’ from the river's chasm origin, garden existence, and cave demise. Thus it objectifies and unites diverse elements of Kubla's vision of life.”<sup>14</sup> Against this reading I would suggest that the image of the floating shadow of the dome culminates the tensional rather than symbiotic relationship between the estate and the sacred river. The dome here is not presented as rearing above the Alph but immersed in it. Its shadow does not even span the river but ends

“midway on the waves” like flotsam. The funereal quality of the floating shadow is reinforced contextually by the preceding prophecy of destruction and the “mingled measure” which serves as a daemonic dirge in advance of the prophecy's fulfillment.

The irony of the exclamatory couplet is as dark as it has been misconstrued. Can we possibly take the lines at face value as Coleridge's breathless admiration for Kubla's artistry? I think not, for the caves of ice are clearly neither part of his landscaping plan nor designed by his architectural “device.” The immensity, autonomy and ultimate conquest of the dome make a mockery rather of Kubla's engineering efforts. The miracle is not the construct but the vision which subsumes the dome and all its signifies, proclaiming itself in the poet's wonder.<sup>15</sup>

## II

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.

(ll. 37-41)

The shift of focus from the second to the third stanza is as dramatic in its mode as the shift between the first and second stanzas. Coleridge's musical maiden is perhaps the most famous woman in English lyric poetry, but our discourteous question must be, What is she doing here in the first place? The tenuousness of her connection with the Khan's estate is not to be gainsaid. She clearly does not appear in the Xanadu/Alph landscape itself, nor does she appear to be especially concerned with it. Schulz proposes that the speaker's “knowledge of Xanadu came to him in a ‘vision’ in which a maid sang on a dulcimer of the pleasure-gardens of the Khan.”<sup>16</sup> This too is a widespread interpretation, but one founded on the association patterns of the reader rather than on the text. The maid does not, first of all, sing of Xanadu but Mount Abora, which shifts the scene from the Far East to a composite of Africa and the Middle East.

The two most important referents of the portmanteau-word “Abora,” as Lane Cooper and J. B. Beer have demonstrated are Mount Amara and Beth-Abara.<sup>17</sup> Mount Amara is the false Eden of the Abyssinian kings which Milton describes as “enclosed with shining Rock / A whole dayes journey high” (*Paradise Lost*, IV, 283-84). Beer, tracing Coleridge's allusion from Milton to Burnet's *Sacra Theoria Telluris*, connects the maid to a tradition of troglodyte guardians of antediluvian wisdom, Abyssinian “Atlanteans.” Beth-Abara is the site of John's baptism of Christ on the Jordan (John 1: 28).<sup>18</sup>

Now how does this relate to the visionary landscape of the first two stanzas? Continuing our reading of the poem as a process, its narrative the self-proclamation of a visionary experience in progress, we must note the sudden change of tone with tense after the introduction of the Abyssinian maid, the pivotal phrase being “once I saw.” The adverb marks the ending of the reverie, the beginning of waking to the summons of the man from Purlock or Spectre of Urthona. The damsel's cameo appearance occurs at the fulfillment of the miraculous vision of caves and inaugurates its dissolution, like the White Goddess at the end of Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, whose presence absorbs the seascape and narration into void and ellipsis. She consummates the vision even as she dissolves it.

The Abyssinian maid is the wailing woman redivivus, the Muse of the fulfilled vision as the wailing woman is the witch of initiation. The daemonic female is metamorphosed from erotic seductress to virginal apparition. Visually, the hillside is transformed through the river journey into Mount Abora. Aurally, the wails modulate through the mingled measure and ancestral voices to the song on the dulcimer.

The theme of that song is the very experience of initiation which the poet has been undergoing, his introduction into the esoteric mysteries of the visionary imagination (Mount Amara) and poetic baptism in his own sacred river (Beth-Abara). The intratextual continuity and dualism of the woman and maid may be compared to the intertextual relationship of Keats's *belle dame* and Moneta—in both cases daemonic marriage prerequisite to divine instruction.

Though the five lines are among the lyrical fragments most often quoted *in vacuo*, their magic is almost wholly contextual, the culmination of the visionary rite of passage that begins with the picturesque phantasm of Xanadu and progresses to the spectral baptism of the seething fountain and ice. The context makes clear that the maid is not the poet's guide to Xanadu but an emblem of the visionary realm that transcends it, which the poet has discovered and would now revisit, already “haunted” as Eliot described him, though not yet derelict of her presence.

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

(ll. 42-48).

Coleridge noted in passing in July 1800: “Alexander's Feast—a noble subject still for a bold fellow.”<sup>19</sup> The irony of this is that in “Kubla Khan” he had already composed a Romantic revision of Dryden's theme, with differences that have much to say about both the poetic self and its relationship to its audience. Dryden's Timotheus, a musical wizard, has the capacity to manipulate his audience, particularly the king Alexander, while himself remaining impervious to the charms of his art. In terms of Northrop Frye's theory of modes he is a figure approaching the mythic in his preternatural power of song. The poet of “Kubla Khan,” however, is a high mimetic figure with aspirations to the heroic or godlike that are undercut by his own subjunctives. The indication, clearly is that he *cannot* revive the song which has been silenced with the Alph. Again the autonomy of the vision is underscored. The poet falls as short of Timotheus as Timotheus does of Dryden's Saint Cecilia (“He raised a mortal to the skies, / She brought an angel down”).

The terrific quality of the poet's aspiration ranks with Blake's depiction of the struggles of Los and Wordsworth's commitment to the psychic abyss in the Prospectus to *The Recluse*. Its force is irreparably diminished if we take Coleridge merely figuratively—i.e., interpret the “seeing” of the poet's audience as a vicarious participation, “imaginative” in the most pallid sense, in his song. His “deep delight,” on the contrary, is meant to be a contagious and shamanistic ecstasy that “wins” both him and his audience as fully as Life-in-Death wins the soul of the Ancient Mariner. His inspired song, consequently, transcends normal communication and abolishes aesthetic distance to approach the condition of apocalyptic discourse by “Visionary forms dramatic” in Blake's version of Eternity.

The reaction of the poet's audience in “Kubla Khan,” however, returns us from Eternity to its masquerade as 1797:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The lines are among the earliest traces of the pattern of progressive alienation of the Romantic artist from his audience that Frank Kermode, among others, has investigated.<sup>20</sup> The poet's listeners are not too obtuse to recognize his frenzy as sacred—their dread is itself “holy”—but it is clear they prefer more decorous modes of revelation. Their formation of a protective circle—still a feature of Islamic rites of exorcism in Iran—is itself a variant of the Khan's construction of encircling walls and towers. But the most desperate (and effective) defense against vision is their clenched eyelids.

The audience, however, is simultaneously an agent in the Coleridgean psychomachia, and the unremitting intensity of the poet's magical aspiration is derived in part from his own resistance to its fulfillment. Even at this stage Coleridge has been made aware of the pitfalls of the road on which he found himself. This recognition, I believe, led him finally to abandon it, the experience of the later Muse-figures Life-in-Death and Geraldine confirming the fears of the innocent bystanders of the conclusion. The milk of Paradise and the infernal fountain, like the wailing woman and the Abyssinian maid, prove to be one and the same.

### Notes

1. Marshall Suther, *Visions of Xanadu* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965); John Shelton, “The Autograph Manuscript of ‘Kubla Khan’ and an Interpretation,” *Review of English Literature*, 7 (1966), 32-42; Alan C. Purves, “Formal Structure in ‘Kubla Khan,’” *Studies in Romanticism*, 1 (1962), 187-91; Charles I. Patterson, Jr., “The Daemonic in *Kubla Khan*: Toward Interpretation,” *PMLA* [*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*], 89 (1974), 1033-42; Irene H. Chayes, “‘Kubla Khan’ and the Creative Process,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 6 (1966), 1-21; George Watson, “The Meaning of ‘Kubla Khan,’” *Review of English Literature*, 2 (1961), 21-29.
2. John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927; rpt. Sentry ed., n.d.), pp. 324ff; M. H. Abrams, *The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium Visions on the Works of DeQuincey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge* (Harvard Univ. honors thesis, 1934; rtp. New York: Perennial Library, 1969), p. 46. Preface (and poem) quoted from *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912). I, 295-98.
3. Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953); Fruman, *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (New York: Braziller, 1971), pp. 334-50. *Memoirs of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (New York: Harper, 1874), p. 253: “My Uncle Southey had some good stories of dream verse-making. He was a skeptic on the subject. He thought that, on these occasions, men either dreamed that they composed in a dream (if the poem was good for any thing, like ‘Kubla Khan’), or dreamed that their dream verses were good poetry. ...”
4. Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970), pp. 214-24; Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (London: Gollancz, 1974), p. 255 more cautiously suggests: “What we may feel inclined to believe is that certain glimpses, or snatches, of *Kubla Khan* possibly derive from that dream. ... He was left with a handful of remembered fragments of his dreaming and these, at some unspecified date, he welded together. ...” Abrams, *The Milk of Paradise*, though accepting the sleep theory, stresses the influence of the opium on the configurations of the dream, as does R. C. Bald, “Coleridge and *The Ancient Mariner*: Addenda to *The Road to Xanadu*” in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, ed. Herbert Davis, William C. DeVane and R. C. Bald (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1940), pp. 1-45. Note quoted from *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957-72), I, 349—hereafter cited at “CL” in the text. The italics are mine in this instance.
5. *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. James Dykes Campbell (London: Macmillan, 1893), xlii, n.; E. H. Coleridge's edition, I, 296; Hanson, *Coleridge: The Early Years* (New York: Russell, 1962), pp. 259-60.

6. See also E. K. Chambers, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Biographical Study* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1938), pp. 100-03.
7. *The Road to Xanadu*, p. 326.
8. Watson, p. 28: "Certainly the Khan is very like an Augustan Englishman as seen through Romantic eyes. The overwhelmingly important fact about his 'pleasure-dome' with its surrounding park is its artificiality. ..." Wrongly, I believe, Watson finds the whole of ll. 1-36 a failed exercise in an antiquated manner. See also Shelton, p. 35ff contra the "Augustan" argument.
9. Werner W. Beyer, *The Enchanted Forest* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), pp. 118-43.
10. *Cowper: Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford, 4th rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 180-81.
11. Text of the poem from *James Thomson: Poetical Works*, ed. J. Logie Robinson (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1908), pp. 255-306.
12. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1933), p. 69.
13. This contra Campbell, *The Poetical Works*, p. xlii, n: "... it seems far more probable that *Kubla Khan* was composed after *Christabel* (I) and *The Ancient Mariner* than that it was the first breathing on his magic flute." Apart from intratextual thematic considerations, the relative brevity of "Kubla Khan" would seem to argue against Campbell.
14. *The Poetic Voices of Coleridge: A Study of His Desire for Spontaneity and Passion for Order* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1964), p. 117.
15. The contrast I am suggesting between the picturesque and the daemonic is supported not only by Coleridge's tone but by later remarks of his on the structural strategies of the two modes: "Where the parts by their harmony produce the effect of the whole, but when there is no seen form of a whole producing or explaining the parts of it, where the parts only are seen and distinguished, but the whole is felt—the picturesque. Where neither whole nor parts, but unity as boundless or endless allness—the sublime" (*Biographia Litteraria*, ed. J. Shawcross [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907]. II, 309). The "beauties" of Xanadu and the mystery of the Alph.
16. Schulz, *The Poetic Voices of Coleridge*, p. 117.
17. Cooper, "The Abyssinian Paradise in Coleridge and Milton," *Modern Philology*, 3 (1906), 327-32; Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), p. 256.
18. *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 251-54, 156.
19. *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York, Princeton and London: Bollingen Series L, 1957- ), I, 759.
20. *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge, 1957), esp. Ch. I, "The Artist in Isolation."

## Criticism: Stephen Tapscott (essay date 1981)

SOURCE: "Pandemonium in Xanadu," *Romanticism Past and Present*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1981, pp. 23-40.

[In the following essay, Tapscott proposes that Coleridge's vision of Xanadu in "Kubla Khan" closely parallels Milton's *Eden before the Fall*, both in its description of the physical detail and in its moral ambiguity.]

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

Kubla Khan decrees his dome in an Edenic setting. Mythic, exotic, and remarkably tangible for a visionary landscape, the first representation of Xanadu locates the mystical drama and prepares for the full description of the dome.<sup>1</sup> In the first two lines of the poem, Coleridge specifies the place (Xanadu), the central actor

(Kubla Khan), his action (the decree), and its effects (the dome). That is, the opening lines pre-scribe Xanadu and Kubla Khan's action in it. The effects of that action precede the materials in which the action takes form. Kubla Khan establishes his construct over “Alph, the sacred river” by pronouncing his “decree”—a verbal power—over the innate, pre-verbal possibilities of the scene. So he establishes a wall around “forests ancient as the hills.” This enclosure changes not the place itself, but its status. Uncircumscribed, the scene is a wilderness. Walled in, the scene is a “natural” wild garden.

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.

Most of the details of this *locus amoenus* are archetypally common to representations of Paradise. In his prefatory note to the poem, Coleridge alludes to a section of *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, the history of English explorations he had been reading when the substance of his own poem first oneirically occurred to him. That account gives the shape and first details of Kubla Khan's garden in terms that make the landscape sound less like a wilderness paradise than like an eighteenth-century park with “fertile,” “pleasant,” and “delightful” details:

In Xanadu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the *Pilgrimage* supplies many details for Coleridge's paradise-garden—but I am interested in what happens as Coleridge reorganizes those given details into his own vision. The change involves both nuance and scope. What had been a sumptuously cultured *hortus conclusus* in the seventeenth-century text becomes in the nineteenth-century version an energized early-Romantic garden. Coleridge's revision of the oriental of British landscape architects like Capability Brown and William Kent, who rejected the linear and geometrical formalism of Le Nôtre in favor of a more organically shaped formalism. To make the formal garden a cultivated miniature of a natural wilderness, Kent even planted dead tree-stumps in the panorama, “to give the air of a greater truth to the scene.” Horace Walpole characterized the change in gardening attitudes with a metaphor of the architects' new freedom: “They leaped the fence and saw that all nature was a garden.”

The terms of Coleridge's revision of Purchas's original scene are the terms of Edmund Burke's distinction between beauty and sublimity: beauty consists in smallness, smoothness, and brightness of color (Purchas), while the sublime emerges from huge, rough, dark potential sources of pain and danger (Coleridge).<sup>3</sup> As he changes the descriptive emphasis from that of his source, Coleridge makes the enclosed territories offer a pleasure less constrained and more potentially sublime: what had offered sumptuous and stately pleasures now affords a wider range of emotional responses. In Burke's terms, beauty causes love, but sublimity generates desire:

And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery ...  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

Besides the Byronic foreshadowing, Coleridge adds caves, grottoes, and subterranean waters to his paradise, to make the landscape itself sound like a field that generates sublime emotions. And yet this landscape is not allegorical but archetypal, figuring the emotional action itself: it *is* the symbolic narrative at this point in the

poem. Part of the change in emphasis is the result of a change in style. It seems to me that part of Coleridge's adaptation of his source consists in a formal "Miltonizing" of the original details, especially the images, the diction, and the line. The elaborated description of Xanadu, in fact, verbally echoes that section of *Paradise Lost* (IV, 138-181) in which Satan approaches the fertile, prelapsarian earth. On his mission of disharmony, Satan lands and surveys a morally untested world, an "Assyrian Garden, where the Fiend / Saw undelighted all delights" (*PL*, IV, 285-286). The details Satan notes in this new world surrounding the tree of knowledge resemble the details of Xanadu around the pleasure-dome. In Milton's *paysage moralisé*, I hear the beginnings of Coleridge's "green hill athwart a cedarn cover":

So on he fares, and to the border comes  
Of Eden, where delicious Paradise,  
Now nearer, Crowns with her enclosure green,  
As with a rural mound the champaign head  
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides  
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,  
Access deni'd; and over head up grew  
Insuperable highth of loftiest shade,  
Cedar, and Pine, and Fir, and branching Palm,  
A silvan Scene.

(*PL*, IV, 131-140)

Above the trees Satan observes that "the verdurous wall of Paradise up sprung" (IV, 143)—an observation consonant with Purchas's garden, with the Genesis depiction of Eden, and with Coleridge's opening description of walled Xanadu.<sup>4</sup> Of these alternatives, Xanadu most closely resembles the Eden Milton's Satan sees. In Xanadu "blossomed many an incense-bearing tree"; Milton's Satan, arriving in Eden, had also seen

... higher than that Wall a circling row  
Of goodliest Trees loaden with fairest Fruit,  
Blossoms and Fruits at once of golden hue ...  
... now gentle gales  
Fanning their odoriferous wings dispense  
Native perfumes, and whisper whence they stole  
Those balmy spoils.

(*PL*, IV, 146-148, 156-159)

As he nears Eden, Satan smells the flowering aromas of vernal innocence ("So entertain'd those odorous sweets the Fiend / Who came thir bane" [IV, 166-167]), and he is slightly better "pleas'd" (IV, 167) by those smells than Asmodeus in *The Book of Tobit* had been pleased by the smell of burning fish entrails ("Asmodeus with the fishy fume," [IV, 167]). But Asmodeus, the "demon-lover" of Sara in *The Book of Tobit*, was frightened away by those fumes, when Sara's new human lover Tobias burned the fish in exorcism. When Coleridge represents the "holy and enchanted" grandeur of Xanadu with the image of a "woman wailing for her demon lover," he indirectly suggests the innocence of Milton's Eden—but innocence with a difference. In Milton, Satan had been attracted-and-repelled by the smell of innocence rising from the garden; innocence had seemed, at the moment, its own defence against evil. In Coleridge, however, the innocence of Xanadu is less self-protective, more complicated in its relation to moral evil. In Milton the landscape is neutral, the battleground on which moral struggles are waged; in Coleridge the landscape itself seems to be a part of the struggle. Milton pictures Satan climbing the wooded hill to Eden, up "th' ascent of that steep savage Hill" (IV, 172), but "savage" here seems to mean primarily "wooded" (from the Latin "silvaticum"). When Coleridge describes Xanadu as a "savage place ... holy and enchanted," he seems to make the place itself participate in the emotional sublimity. Thus from the top of Eden's hill "our general Sire" (IV, 144) can see the walls of Paradise among "his nether Empire neighboring round" (IV, 145), just as Kubla Khan can survey "twice five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers ... girdled round." Coleridge seems to take many of the details



of his Xanadu from Milton's depiction of Eden—but, significantly, Coleridge chooses those scenes in *Paradise Lost* in which Eden is pictured through Satan's eyes. In *Paradise Lost* we see not only innocence, but innocence-already-threatened. In “Kubla Khan” we see not simply a wilderness where Kubla builds his palace, but a landscape of dangerous sublimity, in which Kubla Khan's energy participates.

Like Milton's threatened Eden, Coleridge's woody, fragrant Xanadu suggests elements of a frightful power: a “deep romantic chasm” shatters the hills. As in Eden, something in the grottoed landscape is already (literally) undercut, figuratively vulnerable, but the situation in neither poem decays immediately into evil. Milton separates the evil (Satan) from the place (Eden) and then narratively brings them together, as Satan leaps into Eden. But Coleridge's setting contains both elements of the Miltonic duality of Satan-in-Eden. It is a “savage place,” with a sublime and demonic potential in itself: beneath the terrain, “caverns measureless to man” pock a sunken river's path to a “sunless sea.” That is, like the general structure of *Paradise Lost*, the narrative delineation of Xanadu already implies a dark subversive force beneath the Edenic aspect. Milton had fully chronicled the danger of Satan's example, even before the poem's first glimpse of Paradise. Similarly, Coleridge suspends the story of Kubla Khan's dome for thirty lines, until he has set it in a dualistic landscape in which the “chasms” and the “sunless sea” undercut the physical geography as overtly as the moral darkness and void of Milton's hell (Books I-III) had tacitly subverted the sunlit Eden (Books IV and V) of *Paradise Lost*. Milton keeps his landscape neutral by relying on his narrative to suggest threat; Coleridge lyrically makes the place itself the image of a sublime tension.

The descriptions of the rivers in the landscapes of Milton and Coleridge illustrate both the influence of Milton on Coleridge and also the differences between their uses of setting. Coleridge makes the deep chasms a part of Xanadu itself—but Milton separates innocent Eden from the dangerous part of the universe. Through the darkness of the inferno in Book II of *Paradise Lost*, several of the most ambitious demons wander in search of a place to found their terrible kingdom. They bend

Four ways thir flying March, along the Banks  
Of four infernal Rivers that disgorge  
Into the burning Lake their baleful streams;  
Abhorred Styx, the flood of deadly hate,  
Sad Acheron of sorrow, black and deep;  
Cocytus, nam'd of lamentation loud  
Heard on the rueful stream; fierce Phlegeton  
Whose waves of torrent fire inflame with rage.

(*PL*, II, 574-581)

Discovering a “frozen Continent” (II, 587) of snow and ice, the demons continue

O'er many a Frozen, many a Fiery Alp,  
Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and shades of  
death,  
A Universe of death.

(*PL*, II, 620-622)

In stark monosyllables, Satan surveys the material features of his universe. His alienating pride shapes itself in sunken rivers, in fire, and in ice much like Dante's deepest circle as well as Coleridge's “dome.” In Milton, the landscape is an allegorical vista through which the narrative moves sequentially. Miltonic place is static in its figurative implications, because the ontological truth it figures is a fixed, doctrinal truth: Satan recognizes his moral state as a projection onto God's originally and ultimately good universe. In Coleridge, place serves not only as the location but as the vehicle of the symbolic narrative itself. In his narrative Milton brings innocence and evil together; Coleridge in his lyric mode shows that innocence and evil coexist *in* the same place.

Thus Xanadu resembles Milton's prelapsarian Eden both in the tangible details (vista, trees, walls, hills, odors) and in its moral ambiguity; it is innocence, but described in a context that implies a threat to that innocence. The danger in both Xanadu and Eden is a moral danger, but it is also the result of a narrative frame; each paradise is made to seem subverted because of the narrative order of its presentation. Eden is endangered because Satan approaches it; Xanadu is already "savage," and Kubla Khan's "decree" seems to participate in the dangerous sublimity already latent in his world. But a simple equation of Xanadu with Milton's Eden or with one of Milton's "false Paradises" ("that faire field / Of Enna" (IV, 268) or even Mount Amara, the seat of "Abassin Kings" [IV, 280]) states the relation a little too baldly.<sup>5</sup> The important feature of Xanadu is not that it is an Edenic world, nor that it is tacitly undercut, nor even that it resonates with Miltonic or Romantic depths—but that it is a fierce and tenuous world, where Kubla Khan's construct rises from its surroundings. Xanadu is not "fallen"; rather, as in Milton's Eden, a naturally malign force underlies its order. In Milton the landscape is neutral, a field on which forces of good and evil will contend; Coleridge works the allegory to a symbolic fusion as he makes the landscape of Xanadu itself the figure of moral ambiguity. In *Paradise Lost* the moral threat is Satan, whose appearance in the poem frames the picture of Eden, and the aesthetic threat is Milton's sympathy with Satan. In "Kubla Khan," however, the moral and the aesthetic are more overtly equated, both in the sublime landscape and in the figure of Kubla Khan.

Thus far, that is, Xanadu sounds like Eden under threat. But Coleridge's poem of Xanadu could certainly exhibit Romantic tendencies without overtly alluding to Miltonic precedents: the Romantic tradition of the theogony of the landscape, one might object, could explain the resemblances between Xanadu and a sublime vista. By the middle of the opening movement of "Kubla Khan," however, the scene is more directly set for human action (with Kubla's dome), and the directly Miltonic echoes increase.<sup>6</sup> By line 19, the "chasm" in Xanadu, with "ceaseless turmoil seething," erupts with the raw force of the "sacred river" into a "mighty fountain," a well-spring of wild energy over which Kubla Khan declares his dome. Strikingly, the underlying water images of *Paradise Lost* similarly erupt with Satan's official entry into the garden, in Book IX. That scene had been prefigured in Book IV, when Milton had described how, in Satan's ken, the river Tigris winds through Eden and emerges as a fountain near the Tree of Life:

Southward through Eden went a River large,  
Nor chang'd his course, but through the shaggy hill  
Pass'd underneath ingulft, for God had thrown  
That mountain as his Garden mould high rais'd  
Upon the rapid current, which through veins  
Of porous Earth with kindly thirst up-drawn,  
Rose a fresh Fountain, and with many a rill  
Water'd the Garden; thence united fell  
Down the steep glade, and met the nether Flood,  
Which from his darksome passage now appears,  
And now divided into four main Streams,  
Runs diverse, wand'ring many a famous Realm.

(*PL*, IV, 223-234)

Xanadu, with its "gardens bright with sinuous rills," begins to sound more like Milton's Garden "with many a rill / Water'd."<sup>7</sup> Within the narrative of *Paradise Lost*, this close rendering of the geography in Book IV focuses attention on the fountain; eventually, in Book IX, Satan uses that entrance into Eden when he approaches Eve for the last time. The "sacred river" of Coleridge's Xanadu may have as its literary source just this place in Book IX, the scene of the eruption of the Tigris into Eden and, with it, the arrival of Satan's linguistic temptation and duplicity:

... thrice the Equinoctial Line  
He circl'd ...

There was a place,

Now not, though Sin, not Time, first wrought the

change,  
Where Tigris at the foot of Paradise  
Into a Gulf shot under ground, till part  
Rose up a Fountain by the Tree of Life;  
In with the River sunk, and with it rose  
Satan involv'd in rising Mist, then sought  
Where to lie hid.

(*PL*, IV, 64-65, 69-76)

Both of these eruptions—the fountain and the emergence of Satan into Eden—seem to underlie the fountain section of “Kubla Khan”:

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.

A thematic pattern thus links the enclosed scene of Xanadu with Satan's prospect of Eden in *Paradise Lost*; and it also links the eruption of the “sacred river,” a symbol in Coleridge's poem of the raw imaginative power over which Kubla Khan constructs his dome, with the sudden introduction of temptation or of willfulness into Eden. These overtones also seem implicitly to ally the achievement of Kubla Khan in Xanadu with the temptation of Satan in Eden. Satan, the agent of subversion and of untoward self-assertion, tempts Eve with the promise of forbidden knowledge and with the ability to speak the language of the gods, just as the serpent, Satan's disguise, aspires above his station to speak human language. Kubla Khan's achievement over “Alph, the sacred river,” is more subtle; his construction hovers over the waters of the fountain, and from the “caverns measureless to man” the echoes of the torrent resound to the dome. Acting on the power of the jetting fountain, Kubla Khan decrees a dome removed from the shouts of human history. He accomplishes a “miracle of rare device,” from which he can hear—but does not participate in—“the mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves.” Kubla Khan's is the realization of a different kind of tempting abstraction, not exclusively that of Satanic language but that of self-enclosed, perfect, willed form: of blazing ice. What had been a moral question in Milton—the fire and ice of Satanic self-assertion, countermanning God's orderly creation—becomes in Coleridge's revision a tension between morality and aesthetics; Kubla Khan's dome associates the “ice” of aesthetic form with the “light” of Satanic egotism.

Of course, Coleridge may have intended to manipulate these Miltonic overtones into a subtle irony. After all, one could argue, Kubla Khan's miraculous achievement was a “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!” Its convex of light illuminates the caves; when Kubla Khan decrees the dome—realizing it by pronouncing it—he may be acting as an agent of verbal ordering, like the divine Creator who with his word gave form and light to chaos. This analogy between human imagination and the divine creation does underlie Coleridge's famous description of the primary imagination: “The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite i am.” Distinguished in this section of the *Biographia Literaria* from the primary imagination, the “secondary” imagination shares the “kind of its agency” but differs in the degree and mode of its operation. The secondary imagination, which coexists with the “conscious will,” “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to identify and unify.”<sup>8</sup> The primary imagination is essentially synthetic, perceptual, and reconciling; it resembles the Creator's force through analogy (“repetition”). But the secondary imagination demands independent identity and will; it rivals the Creator's work because its wielder assumes that his power is metaphorically identical

with God's. Thus the secondary imagination seeks to recreate unity through "identification," not through "repetition" of a divine self-assertion in a human consciousness. We may ask whether Kubla Khan's imaginative construction is a construct of the "primary" or of the "secondary" imagination—and what such a distinction might mean. To answer that question, we should return to "Kubla Khan" and to the Miltonic subtext its author seems to be constructing.

Though "holy and enchanted," Xanadu is a "savage place." The chasm there underlies the fountain "with ceaseless turmoil seething." In this tumult, above the dancing water and the rocks, Kubla Khan builds his palace. This construction, consistently described *via* Satanic references from Milton, recalls the rearing of the Satanic edifice that dominates Milton's hell: Pandemonium. That citadel of evil pride and of self-aggrandizing imagination rises over another deep and sublime chasm, drawn from the natural resources of the landscape. "That underneath had veins of liquid fire / Sluic'd from the Lake" (I, 701-702): a demonic precursor of Coleridge's dome above the fountain. The imagination of Kubla Khan seems to build, by implication, the new Pandemonium that is Xanadu. Its shape is certainly appropriate: Pandemonium is the spherical projection of Satan's spherical mind as a place—hell—with spatial dimensions ("The mind is its own place," "Space may create new worlds"). The "dome" shape of the pleasure-dome seems an analogue to the "huge convex of Fire" that is the shape of hell, Satan's skull-bounded, materialistic self-consciousness.

... long is the way

And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light;  
Our prison strong, this huge convex of Fire,  
Outrageous to devour, immures us round  
Ninefold, and gates of burning Adamant  
Barr'd over us prohibit all egress.

(*PL*, II, 432-437)

Coleridge maintains that Milton "himself is in every line of 'Paradise Lost,'"<sup>9</sup> and though he claims that the character of Satan is "pride and sensual indulgence, finding in Self the sole motive of action," Coleridge admires and emulates Milton for his ability to write his own moral autobiography in colossal cipher. Milton's externalized subjectivity is his greatness as a writer, though paradoxically Satan's subjective sublimity is the cause of his sin.<sup>10</sup> In this Miltonic context, the relations between "Kubla Khan" and *Paradise Lost*—that is, relations (1) between the site of the dome above the source of Alph in Xanadu and the site of Satan's temptation at the fountain in Eden, (2) between the assertion of Kubla Khan's imaginative energy and the introduction of Satan's perversely egotistic imagination into Eden, and (3) between the realization of Kubla Khan's decree of an enclosed "pleasure-dome" and the generation of Pandemonium as the spatial outgrowth of Satan's solipsistic pride—begin to spell out an underlying thematic concern of Coleridge's poem. Kubla Khan *declares* his palace *above* the magic fountain of Alph, and by identifying Kubla's creative power as somehow dangerous in its resemblance to the infernal construct, Coleridge begins to characterize the generative or constructive power of the master-builder of such an imaginative form. If Kubla Khan's achievement seems to make him an agent of commanding genius, his imagination, like Satan's, impresses itself upon the world in order to find reassurance of its own power; the detail of the "ancestral voices" is strangely incongruous with a notion of the dome as sunnily, positively self-complete. By associating Kubla Khan's dome with the convex pride of Milton's Satan, Coleridge characterizes a certain kind of imaginative power as potentially solipsistic and dangerous, both to its wielder and to the world in which he operates.

Coleridge's famous definition of the primary imagination stresses the synthetic power of the purified imagination, the creation on earth that figures the Creation in the universe. But Coleridge's secondary imagination—though also subjective and vivifying—suggests further, the concomitant danger of such a power when it is exercised by fallible human will. The problem is the willful self's apparently egotistic assertiveness: the self begins to loom huge, an element of diversity that may hinder a complete interpenetration of subject and object, or that may make part of a universal matrix insubordinate to a whole.<sup>11</sup> The secondary imagination

relies on “identification” to “recreate” a unity: it is an “echo” of the primary imagination, a copy of a copy. Milton's Satan, whose imagination willfully replies “i am” to God's universe, generates an imaginative dome of pride from the grandeur of his own mind, which in its paradoxically destructive construction opposes the universal order of God's creation. Like Kubla Khan, who from his dome can hear the welter of history, Satan represents a movement of the imagination toward self-assertion, solipsism, and seductively willful diversity. He is still a ruined archangel, radiant in his grandeur despite his egotistical alienation from God. Though Kubla Khan is not an angel, he is a marvellous and powerful emperor, and his construct hovers above the deep sublime chasms of Xanadu as a decree of genius, both glorious and potentially dangerous. Kubla Khan builds an aesthetic object in “ice”: he is more overtly a figure of the human creator than is Satan, whose construct is his own mind projected outward.

Coleridge superimposes on the scene in Xanadu the memory of a visionary experience, beginning the final movement of “Kubla Khan”:

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.

The speaker of the poem then aspires to recreate that music in an effort to copy the copy, to rebuild that “sunny dome” in air. That is, Coleridge carries the “creator” figure of human will into a mode of further mimesis, copying the creation of a creation; the shift enacts the *Biographia*'s argument about the *willful* repetitive action of the secondary imagination. In Coleridge's image, the maiden's song, followed by the poet's subsequent reconstruction of it, will be the vehicle for his participation in the creative energy emblemized by the dome in Xanadu.

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,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

Milton's heavenly choirs often sang hymns of praise to God (*PL*, IV, 944ff., is a good example), and Coleridge in his career often tried to describe the sacramental song of praise that creation returns to its Creator (as in the “Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni”). But in Milton the ability to make and to enjoy music is not reserved to the angels in heaven. Satan and his followers also need and make music:

In Perfect Phalanx to the Dorian mood Of flutes and soft Recorders ...	... Anon they move
Breathing united force with fixed thought Mov'd on in silence to soft Pipes that charm'd Thir painful steps o'er the burnt soil.	... Thus they

(*PL*, I, 549-551, 559-562)

Even the construction of Pandemonium itself has a musical quality; as the agents of Mammon shape the molten metals for the palace, the effect is one of huge sounds, “As in an Organ from one blast of wind / To many a row of Pipes the sound-board breathes” (*PL*, I, 708-709). Most significant, however—and closest to

Coleridge's vision of a "damsel with a dulcimer ... Her symphony and song"—is this description of Satan's blasphemous construction in hell, Pandemonium, rising as a musical dome or temple:

Anon out of Earth, a Fabric huge  
Rose like an Exhalation, with the sound  
Of Dulcet Symphonies, and voices sweet,  
Built like a Temple.

(*PL*, I, 710-713)

To be sure, there are at least as many dissimilarities as similarities between the Satanic music and the dulcimer "symphony and song." The devils' music, played on pipes, flutes, recorders, and breathing organ pipes, is concerted and subdued. Their song is slow, shared, and social. Coleridge, however, yearns toward a music that is "loud and long": that song of the poet-seer in "Kubla Khan" would "revive" the maiden's solo, so that both songs would noisily and publicly recall the scene in Xanadu (the crashing rocks, tumultuous waters, and echoing shouts). Not to press the point too strongly, it seems that Coleridge rewrites the "Dulcet Symphonies" of Milton's Pandemonium (as the convex of Satan's pride swells like an organ chord) into the dulcimer "symphony and song" of his vision and re-vision. In doing so, he stresses not the shared and subdued qualities of the devils' common music, but the individual performers (the seer, the maiden, Kubla Khan, Satan—and implicitly Coleridge himself), as if to illustrate the alienating and reconstitutive effects of their performances. Associating the recreated vision with Pandemonium and with Kubla's dome, Coleridge suggests that the act of making art is implicitly individuating and potentially solipsistic.

Thus "Kubla Khan" concludes in a regressive series of analogies: the poet-seer "revives" the damsel's song, and that re-creation allies both damsel-and-song and poet-and-poem with Kubla-and-his-work—the description of which, further, verbally resembles Milton's description of Satan-and-his-construct. Through this link of the creator-figures in Coleridge's poem with Milton's energetic and egotistic Satan, "Kubla Khan" describes a process of imaginative construction that has its source of creative energy in an ominous subjective power: all who thus "perform" are isolated by their performances. The decree in Xanadu builds an isolated sunny palace above a river that runs through caverns "measureless to man" and the analogous exercise of creative power by the poet seems, by implication, to suggest a participation both in the Satanic energy of self-definition and in the unworldly activity of formal musical expression. Art serves *both* as a new temptation to the ambition of superhuman knowledge and language *and* as the cause of a fall into duality and relativism. Coleridge's poem presents first an image of Kubla Khan's dome in its landscape, then a visionary moment, and finally a yearning toward a third construct, the re-creation of the first image through the second: "could I revive within me / Her symphony and song." But if the speaker of "Kubla Khan" *could* recreate the dome in air, he would find himself demonically distant from human contact, just as Kubla Khan is—he can hear, but does not join in with, the "ancestral voices" of human history outside his charmed circle. The irony here is that, by articulating his wish to recreate the song, the poet of "Kubla Khan" achieves his wish: the poem ends as if the seer *had* recreated it! The outside observers of the final six lines of the poem are not moved toward a sympathetic unity with the prophet-poet; rather, they proclaim his distinctness and the isolating force of his visionary power: "Beware! Beware!" Those who are not moved by the Satanic energy "close [their] eyes with holy dread." In "Kubla Khan" the poet-seer whose creative energy might participate metaphorically in a Satanic principle has seen a vision; this visionary sense makes him unique and fearful. "His flashing eyes, his floating hair": the others mark him within the boundaries of himself, because his prophetic knowledge cannot be shared.<sup>12</sup>

Coleridge's poem implies that the creative imagination, when exercised with forceful will, can build a new Pandemonium in Eden, by bringing a knowledge of evil and of its energy—self-consciousness that tends toward willful solipsism—into a world that had had no overt moral dualities. In Milton's threatened Eden, Satan had observed a world untainted because untried, a world morally unenjoyed. In Eden, Adam and Eve

did not know about the threat of Satan, but tacitly—through the narrative structure of the poem—that Eden had been threatened. (Satan had fallen and had approached Eden, and Eve herself seems constitutionally weak-willed.) And Adam after the fall foresees the ineluctable consequences of his sin, in Books XI and XII. Like fallen Adam instructed by the angel, Kubla Khan can hear the prophecy of terror in human history. Coleridge's poem, that is, makes the creator figures both self-assertive like Satan and melioristically self-conscious, like Adam. The effect of the seer's vision should be to make the observers “beware.”

And yet, if “Kubla Khan” suggests that certain sublime forms of the imagination are potentially dangerous, how do we account for the unavoidable seductiveness—the tone of celebration and of necessity—in the image of the dome? Coleridge's concept of the sublime seems to imply that a dualistic and relativizing egotism is indeed necessary for the poet. (Even Longinus himself describes sublimity as “the echo of greatness of spirit” in a style.)<sup>13</sup> Sublimity—difficult as it is to define succinctly—involves a change of mode or status or even of identity. Just as the speech of Satan's serpent suggests a transference of power from one species to another, so the poet enacts this sublimation of divine and human powers when he wills unto himself a power of linguistic re-creation, making certain ecstatic emotions of the self the vehicle for an assertive and alienating “delight.” In the example of Milton himself, for instance, Coleridge generalizes that “In the ‘Paradise Lost,’ the sublimest parts are the revelations of Milton's own mind, producing itself and evolving of its own greatness.”<sup>14</sup> Thus the sublime poet—the poet of the self that swells to cosmic proportions—is potentially Satanic in his energies and scope, pitting the Leviathan self against the synthetic unity that was Coleridge's philosophical ideal. M. H. Abrams conflates Coleridge's aesthetic and philosophical ambitions into a single general belief: “This is the root principle throughout Coleridge's thought: all self-compelled motion, progress, and productivity, hence all emergent novelty or ‘creativity,’ is a generative conflict-in-attraction of polar forces, which part to be united on a higher plane of being, and thus evolve, or ‘grow,’ from simple unity into a ‘multeity in unity,’ which is an organized whole.”<sup>15</sup> If Satan and Kubla Khan are representatives of a dangerous power of imagination, the final vision of “Kubla Khan,” though it does suggest Satanic assertiveness, also paradoxically yearns for the best “synthetic and magic” power of the imagination.<sup>16</sup>

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. ...

To rebuild Kubla Khan's pleasure-dome “within” himself (an act of internal vision) and to rebuild the dome “in air” (as a public object, transformed from the ice of the original)—these two modes of “reviving” or of legitimizing that energy of sublime self-assertion make the final effort of the poem a gesture toward an imaginative reconciliation, or at least toward the self-qualifying unity the imagination (even the secondary imagination) can effect. Acknowledging the danger of this egotistical sublimity—the “i am” that the imagination necessarily yet dangerously repeats—the speaker of the poem nevertheless recognizes that to handle such potentially dangerous energy is the necessary work of the visionary poet, a task that risks a Satanic overassertion of the self, that asserts the power of “pleasure” above the power of truth,<sup>17</sup> that marks the seer as “sacred” (etymologically both “consecrated” and “damned”), and that leads him to the highest and most synthetic powers of vision and of coherence.<sup>18</sup>

Recognizing many of the Satanic overtones in “Kubla Khan,” we may finally read the poem as Coleridge's attempt, perhaps not wholly conscious, to work out the implications of the assertion of the generative self weighed against the demands of this ideal of “multeity in unity.” Envisioning the terror of the assertive and imaginative self-in-the-act-of-creation, the poet admits the need to “beware” even as he drinks the forbidden milk of paradise. In “Kubla Khan” the poet recognizes both the terror and the inevitability of manipulating Satanic energies.

An apparent paradox threatens such a “Satanic” (or “demonic”) reading of “Kubla Khan”—but I believe it is a paradox Coleridge anticipated. In fact, it is the problem Blake finds in Milton's relation to *Paradise Lost*—the possibility that Milton may be “of the Devil's party” without recognizing the fact. The emotional imbalance of *Paradise Lost* is aesthetically treacherous. In the opening books of the poem Milton portrays a Satan so glorious and self-sovereign that his narrative presence in the rest of the poem threatens to compromise the poetic energy of his enemies—just as, teleologically, Satan's aggrandized self finds no accommodation in God's subordinated universe. For Coleridge the problem of “Kubla Khan” is analogous: to portray the willful dangers of the visionary imagination in such a way as (1) to assure that he is justly representing the vivid imagination at work and yet (2) to prevent that vigorous portrayal from dominating the poem's larger argument.

This apparent conundrum is the reason, I suspect, why Coleridge frames his lyric poem with the narrative context of an opium dream. The legend is not necessary to the visionary success of the poem, but it can, in effect, block the possibility of self-contradiction by the writer who must use the “genial spirit” to imply its terror. By crediting the poem to the effect of an unwilling opium dream, Coleridge can project a sublimely egotistic poetic vision without sacrificing his ambition for the absolute, the unity that supervises diversities. The opium legend both intensifies and distances that compulsive self-assertion the poem presents.

This rhetorical strategy of setting up a convincing figure that will subsequently be qualified is a familiar gesture in Coleridge.<sup>19</sup> In different poems, the strategy appears both in the conflict of diverse emotions and in the conflict of competing philosophical positions. Emotionally, for instance, the poignant sonnet “To a Friend Who Asked How I Felt When the Nurse First Presented My Infant to Me” (1796) opens on a note of surprised sadness in the young father. This slow-paced melancholy is finally submerged in a more complex joy when, at the end of the poem, the young man sees his wife and child together. Similarly, the first forty lines of “This Lime-tree Bower my Prison” (1797) embody the private meditative loneliness of the speaker, in order to transmute those feelings into a solitude enriched by sympathy and by imagined companionship in the poem's last movement: “A delight / Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad / As I myself were there!” These poems, from the years just preceding “Kubla Khan,” are instances of the strategy in an emotional mode; an example of the strategy applied to the conflict of philosophical positions—like its use in “Kubla Khan”—might be “The Eolian Harp” of 1795. Addressing his wife in that poem, the speaker of “The Eolian Harp” pursues a waftingly transcendental argument about the benevolent properties of “intellectual” Nature. He leads to the speculation:

And what if all animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,  
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?

Eventually, however, the simple presence of the silent woman in the scene seems to force the speaker to return to a position of almost dismissive emotional faith. Thus “The Eolian Harp” ends on an abrupt repudiation of those visionary philosophical conclusions the rest of the poem had won. In this emotionally dominant key, Coleridge ends the poem with an affirmative address to his wife.

Well hast thou said and holily disprais'd  
These shapings of the unregenerate mind;  
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break  
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.

This double gesture of extension-and-repudiation is overtly the argument in “The Eolian Harp,” as Coleridge emotionally withdraws from a philosophical position to which he is clearly sympathetic. “Kubla Khan” works the same rhetorical effect, not through the argument but through the framing gesture of the poem, to enact the



same withdrawal. In “Kubla Khan” the opium is willed, but the dream is not. Thus Coleridge tries to have both things simultaneously in the one poem: both the glamour of the visionary imaginative projection *and* the necessary humble qualification of that projection. However, far from relativizing the Satanic elements of his poem—or of his image of Milton—Coleridge’s recognition of the demonic implications of his re-vision of the dome seems to allow him to ally himself at this stage of his career with Milton’s power as a sublimely egotistical poet of the terrible energies (the creator of Satan, whether or not consciously sympathetic to Satan). Coleridge can assume this power (of the “secondary” imagination) under the guise of the dreamer (retaining the humility of the “primary” imagination). For the imagination seems to require symbolic acts of differentiation and of willful egotism; the poem must enact the Satanic impulse in order to achieve sublimity, terrible as the consequences are that threaten, and to build its constructs from the finite self. In the *Biographia*, Coleridge refers to just this form of contradiction or balance, as he outlines the claims of his “Dynamic Philosophy” by which opposites and diversities are conjoined in an energized synthesis: “in the existence, in the reconciling, and the recurrence of this contradiction consist the process and mystery of production and life.”<sup>20</sup> In its Satanic imagery and in its qualifying framing-gesture, “Kubla Khan” is Coleridge’s poetic attempt to win just this perilous reconciliation. For the space of the poem, the visionary imagination is both self-generatively potent and also delimited, precariously contained in the dream.

### Notes

1. All the poems cited here are either found in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Prose*, ed. Merritt Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), or in *Coleridge’s Poems*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912).
2. See John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), pp. 356-364. Livingston Lowes argues for sources of the poem’s images in travel literature, such as William Bartram’s *Travels* and in accounts of the exploration of the Nile. See also pp. 367-370, 393-396.
3. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 39ff. Coleridge knew Burke’s work directly, indirectly (through Christian Garve, who translated it into German), and analogously (through related arguments in Schiller). See Coleridge’s *Notebooks*, 2 vols., ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Pantheon/Bollingen, 1957), I, 1675 and II, 1675n.
4. Elisabeth Schneider traces several echoes from Milton’s description of Satan’s approach to Eden (in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*). Pursuing the similarities of geography and of diction, Schneider demonstrates that much of “Kubla Khan” follows from Satan’s view of Eden. See *Coleridge, Opium, and ‘Kubla Khan’* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), pp. 264-265. She also specifically associates the “incense-bearing trees” of Milton’s Eden with the vegetation of Xanadu (p. 198). On the whole, Schneider reads “Kubla Khan” as an effort toward a reconciliation of opposites—an un-Satanic assertion—because of the apparent integration of dream and dreamer at the end.
5. In his important study *Coleridge the Visionary* J. B. Beer reads the first section of “Kubla Khan” as a collection of images of “anti-types of the true Paradise,” in a Miltonic mode, and the final section of the poem (beginning with line 30) as a depiction of a visionary paradise regained. See *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), pp. 216ff. In this context of human historicity—distinct from mythic history—Beer also specifically compares “Kubla Khan” to Adam’s vision in *Paradise Lost*, Books XI and XII. Humphrey House, in a scrupulous reading of “Kubla Khan” and other poems, generalizes about this aspect of Coleridge’s “Miltonizing”: “Positively, it causes a distortion of the poem if we try to approximate this Paradise either to the earthly Paradise of Eden before the Fall or to the Heavenly Paradise which is the ultimate abode of the blessed. It may take its imagery from Eden, but it is not Eden because Kubla Khan is not Adam.” See “‘Kubla Khan,’ ‘Christabel,’ and ‘Dejection,’” in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 310. The narrative situation of Eden in both poems, in any case, precludes any identification of Xanadu with an earthly Paradise or with Heaven. Milton carefully represents not Eden unfallen or Paradise already lost, but Eden undermined. Coleridge copies this careful ambiguity

in the symbolic terrain of Xanadu.

6. Charles I. Patterson, Jr., notes in passing some resemblances to “Mount Amara,” the amoral seat of pleasure in *Paradise Lost*. See “The Daemonic in ‘Kubla Khan,’” *PMLA* [*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*], 89, (October 1974), 1033-1043, which also suggests other echoes from Milton in “Kubla Khan.” Patterson presents a “daemonic” reading of the poem, defining the daemonic element in the poem as an “unrestricted and amoral joy” like that of the pre-Christian philosophers and especially like Plato’s notion of the poet’s *furor divinus*. Citing Livingston Lowes, Patterson concludes: “Coleridge well knew that a daemon and a demon were not the same thing.” In this context, the distinction is essential. Recent “daemonic” readings of Coleridge have tended to stress the ecstatic or even deterministic nature of poetic identity; in a “demonic” reading—as in the overtly Satanic implications of the subterranean forces of “Kubla Khan”—the poet’s will or moral choices seem more directly to inform the aesthetic decisions.
7. Marshall Suther also locates “fountain” images in other works of Coleridge. See *Visions of Xanadu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965). For both Milton and Coleridge, the final source of the image of the rivers of paradise is the description of the River of Eden, in *Genesis* 2:10-14.
8. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (New York: William Gowans, 1852), p. 378.
9. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk and Omniana*, ed. T. Ashe (London: George Bell and Sons, 1909), p. 250: “... it is a sense of this intense Egotism that gives me the greatest pleasure in reading Milton’s works. The egotism of such a man is a revelation of spirit.”
10. See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953; New York: Norton, 1958), pp. 252-254.
11. In the *Biographia* Coleridge associates the “commanding genius” with figures of action; his fullest elaboration of this skeptical and monist attitude toward the self is in “Religious Musings” (December 1794; see lines 127-158).
12. Critics have often associated the “Eyes / That sparkling blaz’d” of Milton’s Satan (*PL*, I, 193-194) with the glance of the Ancient Mariner—and with Coleridge’s eyes! See, for instance, Lowes, p. 230.
13. Longinus, *On the Sublime*, tr. William Smith (1739; rpt. Delmar, N.Y.: Scholar’s Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), sec. XXX, pp. 70-71.
14. Coleridge, “Milton,” p. 624.
15. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 268.
16. Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 451.
17. I am stressing the element of pleasure here as distinct from the terrible voices of human history Kubla Khan can hear from the dome. Compare this emphasis on the enclosing purposes of the dome with Coleridge’s definition of a poem as a species of composition, the purpose of which is not truth but pleasure; Coleridge deliberately eliminates the pedagogic and the admonitory as purposes for the poem (*Biographia*, p. 448).
18. This change from the “pleasure” of the dome to the “delight” of the recreated event echoes Burke’s distinction between the aesthetic effects of “pleasure” and of “delight.” “Pleasure” is relatively straightforward, but self-enclosed, while “delight” is related to the sublime in a mode of negative desire: “delight” is the gratification when pain ends or when a danger is removed. In this sense, one could argue that the ending of “Kubla Khan,” with its substitution of delight for pleasure, reflects a change to a morally formative “beauty.” See Burke, *Sublime*, pp. 35-37.
19. I am indebted to my colleague, Professor Irene Tayler, for showing me this recurrent pattern in several Coleridge poems.
20. Coleridge, *Biographia*, pp. 179-185.

## Criticism: Anthony John Harding (essay date 1982)

SOURCE: "Inspiration and the Historical Sense in 'Kubla Khan,'" *Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Winter, 1982, pp. 3-8.

[In the following essay, Harding discusses the impact of the Old Testament on Romantic poetry, focusing specifically on "Kubla Khan" as an example.]

Coleridge's admiration for the poetry of the Old Testament is well-known. To Coleridge, the Hebrew poets possessed in exemplary form the power of Imagination, the "modifying, and co-adunating Faculty,"<sup>1</sup> which long before the writing of *Biographia Literaria* took a central place in his critical thought. Their poetry, in contrast to that of the Greeks, exhibited a profound sense of the "one Life" uniting all of nature, that sense to which Coleridge himself tried to give expression in "The Eolian Harp," where the phrase "animated nature"<sup>2</sup> suggests a universe constantly permeated by the *anima*, in Hebrew *rûah*, or "breath of God."

The Romantics' adoption of the Old Testament as one of their most important literary models owed much to Robert Lowth, whose *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* attempted to formulate a poetics based on Biblical, rather than on classical and neoclassical, poetic practice. Lowth defended such characteristic features of Hebrew poetry as parallelism, emotional intensity, rhythmic variation, simplicity of utterance, and the use of plain or "low" images even in passages that strove for sublimity.<sup>3</sup>

It was Johann Gottfried von Herder, however, who most effectively brought to the Romantic generation the exhilarating thought that they might actually *emulate* the Hebrew poets. Herder's *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* emphasized the human element in all Old Testament writing. Though language itself was a divine gift, and poetic language pre-eminently so, yet "whatever was given to the most godlike men, even through a higher influence, to feel and experience in themselves, was still human" ("was sie dem göttlichsten Menschen, auch durch höhere Einflüsse zu empfinden gaben, war menschlich"). Like Coleridge, Herder admired the Hebrew poets' sense of the "one Life." For him, the particular genius of the Hebrew poets consisted in the fact that, more than any Greek or Roman poet, they responded to the one great plan of nature, and gave it human utterance. The true poet, he argued, was one who could perceive "connexion, order, benevolence and purpose" ("Zusammenhang, Ordnung, Güte, Gedanken") in nature, and whose work embodied this perception in a true "cosmos" of its own.<sup>4</sup>

Herder denied, however, that any poet or prophet could have direct apprehension of what was in the mind of the Divine Being. While the Biblical characters who spoke in the name of God believed themselves to be inspired, this belief was simply part of the cultural milieu in which they lived, a natural assumption for a people to make during the "infancy" of the human race, and though this belief should not be ridiculed, neither could it be uncritically accepted by the maturer, more discriminating mind of the eighteenth-century reader.<sup>5</sup> Lessing, too, was unable to accept that divine inspiration could be any more than a historically-conditioned, culturally-determined claim by certain of the scriptural writers.<sup>6</sup>

A modern poet who desired to emulate the Old Testament poets' achievement, therefore, could not hope to do so without sharing in some degree their exalted comprehension of nature's holy plan, her "connexion, order, benevolence and purpose." By showing how "human" the Bible was, Herder had brought within reach, it seemed, the Romantics' goal of a universal, progressive poetry, poetry that would be "a mirror of the whole world" ("ein Spiegel der ganzen umgebenden Welt").<sup>7</sup> Yet this challenge of giving human expression to nature's unity must be undertaken without special supernatural aid. The Romantic poet was guaranteed no more assistance than any other human being who undertook a sacred task.

Coleridge, of all the English Romantics, exhibited the tensions of this ambivalent inheritance most acutely, though (despite the praise accorded to Herder in Chapter XI of *Biographia Literaria*) he was no unqualified admirer of Herder's work. Herder's Enlightenment scepticism about humanity's ability to transcend nature, and have direct intuition of the divine, was anathema to Coleridge, who (in his copy of the *Briefe das Studium der*

*Theologie betreffend*) commented scornfully that Adam had a better source for his knowledge of the meaning of love than the rutting of the beasts he saw around him in the Garden of Eden.<sup>8</sup> Yet the poetic agenda set by Herder's *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* and Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenäum* was similar both in its liberating scope and its suggestion of poetic hubris to the agenda set by Coleridge, first for himself and then for his fellow prophet of nature, Wordsworth:

Wordsworth complains, with justice, that Southey writes  
too much at his ease—that he seldom “feels his burthened  
breast

Heaving beneath th' incumbe

... I am fearful that [Southey] will begin to rely too  
much on story and event in his poems, to the neglect of  
those lofty imaginings, that are peculiar to, and definitive  
of, the poet.

(*CL*, I, 320)

The model with which Coleridge rather unfairly compared Southey's recent work here was of course *Paradise Lost*. In this great poem Milton had combined in one epic sweep the three kinds of poetry described in Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie*: poetry that represented “what may be, and should be”; poetry that dealt with moral philosophy, natural science, or history; and—the “chiefe” kind, “both in antiquitie and excellencie”—poetry that “did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God,” such as the Psalms of David, the Book of Job, and the Song of Solomon.<sup>9</sup> Coleridge wished to claim for the poetry of his own age the same ambitious scope, and it was for this reason that, as John Coulson has pointed out, his account of poetic language was ultimately an account of religious language.<sup>10</sup> But it was no longer quite so clear what “religious language” truly was. The Renaissance certainties, especially concerning the unitary meaning of the Bible, had evaporated by Coleridge's time. Even Milton, in some respects, had had to construct his own understanding of the Bible's unifying principle. Now it was more than ever doubtful whether, for example, the Song of Solomon, which Sidney confidently treated as descriptive of the “inconceivable excellencies of God,” could still be received in this sense, when the more acute historical perception of the eighteenth century had seen it as an Oriental love poem, which later tradition had reinterpreted according to different criteria of meaning.

Biblical criticism had begun to show indeed, that there may be a considerable lapse of time between the utterance or composition of a hymn, poem, or narrative and its recognition as consonant with divine truth. An utterance may be judged to have religious significance because it is ascribed to a religious leader (Moses, David, Jesus). Or, as some Biblical critics might prefer to argue, it may be that because an utterance is judged to have religious significance, it is ascribed, after the fact, to a religious leader. It may even emanate from a person with no pretensions to holiness or even to virtue. In each case, it is the attestation of later tradition that counts, not the state of mind of the speaker at the time the utterance was made. For a poet such as Coleridge, the conflict arising from this necessary suspension of judgment was acute. Since the attestation of later tradition was not immediately available, he was forced to be his own “later tradition,” and exercise judgment on his own inspired utterance. It was exactly as if the two moments of religious language—oracular utterance, followed (after some years or centuries) by the judgment that such utterance was consonant with divine truth, that “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (II Peter 1:21)—had become telescoped into a single moment.

As M. H. Abrams has shown, Coleridge shared with Shelley and Wordsworth a particular fondness for the image of the breeze or breath as metaphor for the creative impulse. Abrams links the “correspondent breeze” awakened within these poets by the blowing of a physical, palpable breeze to the breath of life which is called *anima* in Latin, *~un* Greek, and *rûah* in Hebrew.<sup>11</sup> As “The Eolian Harp” shows, the idea of inspiration as an irresistible impulse which stirs the poet's mind to give voice to sweet harmony was an attractive one for

Coleridge, and it was supported by Plato's descriptions of the poet as the instrument of a greater power, moved by a mighty external force:

All good epic poets ... compose all those lovely poems of theirs not by their own skill but in a state of inspiration and possession.

[W]hen a poet takes his seat on the Muse's tripod, his judgment takes leave of him. He is like a fountain which gives free course to the rush of its waters. ...<sup>12</sup>

NeoPlatonism was an influence on some of the early Christian writers, and the Platonic term for the state of being divinely inspired, was taken up by the writer of II Timothy and applied to the Scriptures as a whole (II Timothy 3:16), so it might appear to have the sanction of the early Christian church as a term of approbation for inspired utterance.

The two traditions, Hebrew and Greek, did not, however, combine quite so readily as this suggests. The occurrence of “” in II Timothy is a misleading instance. Other New Testament writers, as well as the authors of the Septuagint, studiously avoided using the term, which connoted pagan vaticination and ecstatic seizure. Mosaic prophecy, indeed, originated not in states of trance or seizure, but in a form of interior dialogue, in which the prophet remained conscious and fully himself (Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 5:4-5, 34:10). It is clear from several texts that for the Hebrews there was no necessary connection between being possessed or inspired and speaking truth. The word nabî, which the Septuagint translated as “” or (when applied to a false prophet) “’n,” meant simply an ecstatic, and it was quite as possible for an ecstatic to utter falsehood as truth (see for instance Ezekiel 13:2, 14:17, and Hosea 9:7).<sup>13</sup> The term rûah, like ~umeant simply “the breath of life,” possessed by every living thing. It did not connote wisdom or insight, evidently, since animals possessed it as well as human beings; yet it was the gift of God, for every living creature drew its life-spirit from the one divine source. The Holy Spirit, which, according to Acts 1:16, Acts 3:18, II Peter 1:21 and other New Testament passages spoke “through the mouths” of David and the Prophets, belonged as a theological concept, to a much later period of Jewish history. While some commentators, it is true, were inclined to treat the *whole* of Scripture as if directly authored or dictated by the Holy Spirit (Philo Judaeus, for example), others very quickly became aware of the difficulties involved in such an approach. These, from Origen in the third century to Schleiermacher in the nineteenth, had to reason that, since prophets could evidently err, even when in a state of inspiration or possession, the action of the Holy Spirit must be allowed to be operative in the later tradition that judges and approves their utterances, and admits some writings to the canon while excluding others, as well as in the original speaker, his or her amanuenses and witnesses, and his or her editors.<sup>14</sup>

When Coleridge interrupted his visionary outpourings in “The Eolian Harp,” then, and (in the person of the “heart-honour'd Maid”) interpreted them as “shapings of the unregenerate mind” (*PW*, I, 102), he was imitating, in a highly condensed form, the centuries-old pattern of inspired utterance followed by the devout sifting of the results to determine whether what they contained was true doctrine, or specious. The poem makes most critics uneasy, of course, because it is unusual to come across a poet who decides to be in such an overt manner his own interpreter or hermeneut. But the tension made explicit here between tau jí the normative tradition of Christianity provides a key to his life's search for a Christian poetic. The frequent use of images of possession and inspiration in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan” suggests that, as Coleridge came to doubt the truth of the claim he made so often in the conversation poems—that it was possible to “read” divine love in the appearances of nature—he was more and more attracted to the idea of supernatural inspiration. In the 1795 “Lectures on Revealed Religion” he had asserted, contrary to the view of Enlightenment thinkers such as Lessing and Herder, that divine truth could be imparted directly to the minds of human beings.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as we have seen, inspiration itself was not immune from the historicist outlook. In Coleridge, the two attitudes—belief in the possibility that divine truth may be imparted to human minds, and acceptance of the important proviso that the normative tradition must be the judge of any inspired or oracular

utterance—were in constant tension. This tension itself, I shall argue, rather than inspiration in its pure and ideal form, was Coleridge's real subject in “Kubla Khan.”

The Ancient Mariner, of course, is the victim of a kind of possession: “Forthwith this frame of mine was renched / With a woful agony” (*PW*, I, 208). It is plain, however, that the Wedding-Guest is given no assurance that the Mariner's tale is divinely sanctioned. It is left to the interpreter (the Wedding-Guest, in the first instance, and then the reader) to decide whether the Mariner's words are prompted by a good or an evil daemon, much as it is left to Hamlet to decide whether the spirit that appears to him in his father's form is an angelic spirit or a goblin damn'd.

Some critics have said that an experience which asks to be recognized as authentically religious does lie at the center of the Mariner's tale. Edward E. Bostetter and John Beer both argue that the Mariner's experience as he blesses the water-snakes, the welling-up within him of divine love, reflects the imagery of religious conversion in, for instance, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the dice game, the cruel and arbitrary liquidation of four times fifty living men, and the haunted state of the Mariner as he passes, like night, from land to land, suggest the dislocated worlds of Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Sartre rather than the world of Bunyan and the Quaker John Woolman, in which true repentance is followed by release from the burden of sin and assurance of heavenly reward. This conclusion remains essentially the same, whether or not we regard the dice game and the death of the crew as having “really happened”; whether the world of the Polar Spirit and the troop of spirits blest is *discovered* by the Mariner, or constructed by him as an explanation for the psychic changes that have taken place within him.

If the Mariner begins as the representative of a prescientific age, untouched by the self-knowledge which his mythologizing capacities can bring him, he ends as the representative of an age very like our own. His condition is, in important respects, post-mythological. He has experienced the terror of a world without God, almost (in the 1798 and 1800 versions of the poem) without Christ. When, at the end of the poem, the Mariner affirms that “the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (*PW*, I, 209), most critics who do not find this statement utterly absurd agree that it expresses at best a highly precarious faith, not in any sense a triumphant “Q.E.D.” rounding off a theological “proof.” Despite his state of possession, the Mariner's world remains one of doubts and mysteries, his narrative uncorroborated.

“Kubla Khan” likewise takes us from myth to modernity. The first thirty-six lines of the poem encapsulate the mythic constructs of the Orient. After Elinor Shaffer's lucid demonstration of the syncretistic ferment that lay behind “Kubla Khan,”<sup>17</sup> it should no longer be possible to take seriously explanations of the poem based on pathology or associative psychology; nor should we continue to refer to Coleridge's mind as consisting of a pagan half which possessed all the creativity and a Christian half which acted as his “orthodox censor.”<sup>18</sup> As a Christian in an age which already stood outside mythology, which looked back on it as on a road previously travelled, Coleridge understood that the poet's task must now be to survey mythology from above: to claim it as a dynamic heritage, not the exhausted fictions derided by Voltaire. “Coleridge's transcendental enterprise was to lay bare the source of mythology, the sense for a God in the human race.”<sup>19</sup>

While Shaffer is surely right to summarize in this way the impulse from which “Kubla Khan” sprang, we have to recognize that her work has raised in acute form all the problems associated with “demythologization” and its close relative in literary criticism, “secularization.” Modern humanistic scholarship sometimes tends to overlook the fact that at the very center of Christian tradition lies the most potent of all images for the overthrow of hieratic religion and the release of the sacred into common experience: the rending of the veil of the temple. For the Christian poet there are grounds for believing that any barriers which once existed between the sacred and the profane have been thrown down. Yet such a statement at once involves the recollection of a historical event—and therefore of the poet's own position in historical time, his fallibility and his finitude. A disturbing infiltration of the anagogical into the historical is an undeniable feature of “Kubla Khan,” as it is of the thirteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, in which the primary Imagination is held to be a repetition, in

the finite mind, of the eternal, divine act of creation, and is echoed by the secondary Imagination or poetic power, which co-exists with the conscious will.

"Kubla Khan" reaffirms the sense for the divine in the human race, but does not subsume or "secularize" it, if by that we mean that the sense for the divine is emptied of its content. Coleridge's seer recollects an historical event (Kubla's decree). He recognizes its symbolic value, as representing humankind's memory of a lost paradise, and hope for its future restoration. Yet, as a self-conscious, time-bound individual, he is not himself a partaker of the consummation he foresees. As Shaffer observes, the already highly syncretic geography of Xanadu is transmuted by the seer into a "sacred geometry," an emblem of paradise that is liberated from the trammels of spatiality;<sup>20</sup> it realizes the cabbalists' dream of the *aleph*, a place that is all places simultaneously. And Max Schulz, relating Kubla's artificial Eden of *hortus conclusus* to other Edenic images in Coleridge's work, and to the Renaissance and classical traditions of the earthly paradise, sees "Kubla Khan" as the supreme instance of Romanticism's search for an "extended Eden," including not only the whole earth, but the cosmos itself.<sup>21</sup> Like the cosmos of "The Rime," however, the cosmos of "Kubla Khan" is hard to "read." Images of nature's beneficence, seen in the sacred river and the fertile ground where Kubla plants his gardens, are countered by images of death and sterility (lifeless ocean, icy cavern). The chasm itself is both life-giving—it is the source of the fountain—and terrifying, a "savage place" (*PW*, I, 297). Kubla's tenancy of this ambiguous microcosm seems to be destined to be brief, his "decree" merely a momentary stay against confusion.

Unlike the Mariner, though, the seer of “Kubla Khan” has been granted, in the vision of the Abyssinian maid, an interpreter, a Beatrice who appears to promise divine guidance to the poet in his ascent to Paradise, or a moon-goddess, a Queen Isis, promising redemption and wholeness to the bard Osiris-Coleridge, and bringing ancient wisdom from the dark caves in which it had been hidden.<sup>22</sup> Through the inspiration which she imparts, the seer would be able to realize in his own imagination Kubla's paradise, and even communicate this inspiration to others:

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. ...

(*PW*, I, 298)

The external world would be made internal, the seer and his audience become inheritors of many thousands of years of history in a single moment of vision. The apocalyptic language of Jewish tradition was first applied to the experiences of an individual life by Paul and other Apostles (Hebrews 12:18-29; II Peter 3:10-15), but Enlightenment thought had carried still further the liberating idea that it was possible for one person's life to recapitulate the whole of human history.

The enthusiast often casts true glances into the future, but for this future he cannot wait. He wishes this future accelerated, and accelerated through him. That for which Nature takes thousands of years is to mature itself in the moment of his existence. For what possession has he in it if that which he recognizes as the Best does not become the best in his life time?

(Der Schwärmer tut oft sehr richtige Blicke in die Zukunft: aber er kann diese Zukunft nur nicht erwarten. Er wünscht diese Zukunft beschleuniget und wünscht, dass sie durch ihn beschleuniget werde. Wozu sich die Natur Jahrtausende Zeit nimmt, soll in dem Augenblicke seines Daseins reifen. Denn was hat er davon, wenn das, was er für das Bessere erkennt, nicht

noch bei seinen Lebzeiten das Bessere wird?)<sup>23</sup>

Though Lessing was writing of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Christian mystics, there are few better summaries of the tragedy of the Romantic poet's position. For Coleridge's seer evidently desires this telescoping of time, the realization in the present moment of a paradise that is both past and to come. He transcends Schiller's distinction between the naive (or objective) poet and the sentimental (or subjective) poet, since he imitates the "outward" world solely as a step towards the transformation of the "inner" world.<sup>24</sup> He is also, however, conscious of a past and a present: "In a vision once I saw." Inevitably, therefore, the inspiration represented by the Abyssinian maid is time-conditioned—not, perhaps, in the sense that the seer had a vision of her and some hours, days or years later recalls it, but in the sense that, for the modern, self-conscious mind, *any* event registered by the consciousness already belongs to a historical past. The significance of the past tense in line 38 of the poem is not to be confused with the Wordsworthian recollection of past years—"The things which I have seen I now can see no more"—nor even with Shelley's principle that "when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline."<sup>25</sup> The difference of time represented by that small word "once" is not a matter of chronological time, but rather of two wholly different orders of time: the realm of the Abyssinian maid, and that of the reflecting, self-conscious poet, whose aspiration towards the condition of operperpetually doomed to frustration. We do not even give whole-hearted assent to our dreams, Coleridge observes, much less to any experience of our waking minds:

even in dreams of Sleep the Soul never *is*, because it either cannot or dare not be, any <One=  
Thing; but lives in *approaches*—touched by the outgoing pre-existent Ghosts of many  
feelings—<sup>26</sup>

Having brought the whole sweep of humankind's history into one brilliant image, therefore, Coleridge, in the second "moment" of "Kubla Khan," bravely makes the transition into the condition of post-mythological humanity. It is not that the modern Christian poet enjoys some promising visions which are brutally blotted out by an "orthodox censor" jangling his keys in some dark dungeon of the mind: the truth is very far from either the farce or the pathos suggested by that reductive explanation. It is rather that the humanist and Enlightenment drive to bring ever more areas of human experience under the hegemony of our matured consciousness—an endeavor in which Coleridge himself was fully engaged<sup>27</sup>—interposed the thinnest but most impenetrable of veils between one area of mental activity and another, and in place of childlike impulse put the "outgoing pre-existent Ghosts of many feelings."

The fact that many Romantic poets felt themselves to be the successors of David and Isaiah, as well as of Homer and Pindar, could not seal them from the spiritual climate of their time, least of all in that most sensitive battleground of psychic tensions, the sense of self. The seer of "Kubla Khan" lost his power to revive within him the maid's symphony and song at the very instant when he recognized the maid as distinct from himself, when he became, that is, *conscious* of her. The truly possessed or inspired conjuror of a daemon has no notion, while he is in his trance, that the daemon is not himself. The Abyssinian maid withdraws into silence, the instant she is recognized by the seer's conscious mind (just as Christabel, confronted with an imperious alter ego who usurps her dead mother's place in her mind and bed, is bewitched into spell-bound silence). This experience of loss, the withdrawal of the Beatrice-figure, the mediator between full knowledge and the conscious, history-bound, verbalizing mind of the poet, is surely the true subject of "Kubla Khan," rather than "inspiration in its ideal, least restricted, most disembarassed and most disembodied form" (C. M. Bowra's phrase).<sup>28</sup> Coleridge creates a seer who precisely exemplifies the "loneliness and fixedness" of the postmythological poet, one who in emulation of the Biblical prophets courts the "state of inspiration and possession," but finds that he cannot transcend his time-bound self. As with John Keats's momentary glimpses of the region he calls "heaven's bourne," it is not the vision that fails the poet, but the other way round. Remaining conscious of time and of mortality, the poet-surrogate betrays his vision by reasserting his own humanity.



Coleridge's seer even pictures himself as a spectator, as it were, *ab extra*, of what would have been his own exorcism, had he really achieved the state of daemonic possession: "Weave a circle round him thrice. ..." (*PW*, I, 298). As is surely sufficiently clear, if we give proper attention to the mood of the verbs ("Could I revive ...," "And all should cry ..."), these lines are not spoken in the character of the possessed bard, but, more subtly, in that of the bard who knows what it is to be possessed, and knows too that this inspired state has escaped him. The most notable virtue of Coleridge's poem, after its dense mythological allusiveness and its hypnotic cadences, may be, unexpectedly, its startling honesty.

## Notes

1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (1956-1971), II (1956), 866. Hereafter cited in text as "CL."
2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols. (1912), I, 102. Hereafter cited in text as "PW."
3. See Murray Roston, *Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism* (1965), pp. 18-26.
4. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. James Marsh, 2 vols. in 1 (1833; rpt. 1971), II, 6; I, 97. German text: J. G. von Herder, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. B. Suphan, 33 vols. (1877-1913), XII (1880), 6; XI (1879), 296.
5. Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, II, 51; *Werke*, XII, 47.
6. See Lessing's "Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft," quoted by Elinor Shaffer, '*Kubla Khan*' and The Fall of Jerusalem (1975), p. 45.
7. Friedrich Schlegel, *Charakteristiken und Kritiken*, I, ed. Hans Eichner, Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe (1959- ), II (1967), 182 (*Athenäum*, no. 116).
8. See G. A. Wells, "Man and Nature: an Elucidation of Coleridge's Rejection of Herder's Thought," *JEGP* [*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*], 51 (1952), 321.
9. Sir Philip Sidney, *Apologie for Poetrie*, ed. J. Churton Collins (1907), p. 10.
10. John Coulson, *Newman and the Common Tradition* (1970), p. 22.
11. M. H. Abrams, "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor," *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism* (1960, rpt. 1971), p. 44.
12. Plato, *Ion*, trans. Michael Oakley, in *Symposium and Other Dialogues*, introd. John Warrington (1964), p. 68; *The Laws*, trans. A. E. Taylor (1934), p. 103.
13. Fr. Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (1972), pp. 8-12.
14. Vawter, pp. 14, 26.
15. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, Bollingen Series LXXV, vol. I (1971), pp. 149-150, 200.
16. Edward E. Bostetter, "The Nightmare World of the Ancient Mariner," *SiR* [*Studies in Romanticism*], 1 (1961-1962), 243-244; John Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (1977), pp. 158, 160.
17. Shaffer, chs. 1-4 *passim*.
18. Of the lines added to "The Eolian Harp" in the "Errata" to *Sibylline Leaves*, beginning "O! the one Life within us and abroad" (*PW*, I, 101), Harold Bloom says that they "sneaked past his orthodox censor": "Coleridge: The Anxiety of Influence," in Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*, English Institute papers 1970-1971 (1972), p. 261. For the opposite view, see Douglas Brownlow Wilson, "Two Modes of Apprehending Nature: A Gloss on the Coleridgean Symbol," *PMLA*, 87 (1972), 42-52.
19. Shaffer, p. 144.
20. Shaffer, p. 165.
21. Max F. Schulz, "Coleridge and the Enchantments of Earthly Paradise," in W. B. Crawford, ed., *Reading Coleridge: Approaches and Applications* (1979), p. 119. Thomas McFarland also finds the poem's imagery Edenic (and its symbolism anagogic): "The Origin and Significance of Coleridge's Theory of Secondary Imagination," in Hartman, ed., *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*, p. 203.

22. Schulz, p. 151; John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (1959, rpt. 1970), pp. 255, 262.
23. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race*, trans. F. W. Robertson (1896), p. 73. German text: *Lessings Werke*, ed. G. Witkowski, 7 vols. (1911), VII, 449.
24. Shaffer, p. 77.
25. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Complete Works*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (1926-1930), VII, 135.
26. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bollingen Series L (1957- ), II (1961), Part 1 (*Text*), entry no. 3215.
27. A point made by Kathleen Coburn in her *Experience Into Thought* (1979), pp. 18-19.
28. C. M. Bowra, *Inspiration and Poetry* (1955), p. 8.

## Criticism: Michael Bright (essay date 1984)

SOURCE: "‘Most Capital Enemies of the Muses’: War, Art, and ‘Kubla Khan,’” *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter, 1984, pp. 396-408.

[In the following essay, Bright surveys three ideas as the thematic sources of “Kubla Khan”—that art is spontaneous and unexpected, that art can only flourish in peacetime, and that great rulers create the peace that is essential for the creation of great art.]

Like some Victorian explorer intent upon discovering the source of the Nile, John Livingston Lowes pursued the manifold streams of Coleridge's reading to reveal the literary origins of “Kubla Khan,” and in *The Road to Xanadu* Lowes disclosed where his searches had led him. So exhaustively thorough was this scholarly adventurer that he left few sources to investigate, and, since the publication of his book in 1927, those few have apparently all been traced. Consequently, when Walter Jackson Bate in 1968 wrote about the various attempts to find the sources of “Kubla Khan,” Lowes's foremost of them, he concluded that “the pickings among possible verbal parallels tend now to be rather slight.”<sup>1</sup> If, however, little remains in the way of verbal parallels, something is yet to be done with the ideas upon which the poem is based, for there are certain unexplored ideas, three to be precise, that inform important parts of “Kubla Khan” and that affect the meaning of this most magical and inscrutable of poems.

The first of these ideas is that art is like a subterranean river, emerging spontaneously and unexpectedly at certain times and places, flowing for a spell, and then, as suddenly as it had appeared, submerging to hidden caverns. This traditional analogy appears in the poem as the river Alph. The second idea is that art flourishes in peacetime but withers in wartime, an idea that explains why “Ancestral voices prophesying war” are heard at the moment the river of art disappears into “the caverns measureless to man.” The third idea, an adjunct to the second, is that great rulers create the peace essential to art and encourage art further by their patronage. Kubla Khan is the representative of this type of enlightened monarch. These, then, are the three ideas, and having thus briefly mentioned them, I now wish to discuss them in three stages. First, I shall consider a late seventeenth-century passage that includes all three ideas, as does “Kubla Khan,” so as to show how the ideas operate together and to allow us to understand from the outset the significance of these ideas to Coleridge's poem. Second, I shall inspect each idea separately to establish its currency at the time Coleridge wrote “Kubla Khan” and to argue that Coleridge, or any educated man for that matter, would surely be familiar with it. Third, I shall suggest how the presence of these ideas in the poem might affect our interpretation of it.

### I

The seventeenth-century passage to which I alluded appears in Charles Perrault's *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes en ce qui Regarde les Arts et les Sciences* (1688), an important book in the dispute between the Ancients and Moderns that raged in France before making its way to England and being satirized in Swift's

*The Battle of the Books*. Perrault (1628-1703) is most widely known today as the author of *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (*Tales of Mother Goose*), but in his own time he was acknowledged as the staunchest champion of the Moderns to oppose Boileau and other proponents of the Ancients.

Perrault's *Parallèle* consists of five dialogues, the first of which deals in part with the Ancients' argument that if there is progress in the arts and sciences, as the Moderns contend there must be for later ages to surpass earlier ones, then how does one account for the demonstrable inferiority of the Middle Ages, the ninth and tenth centuries for example, to the great ages of classical antiquity? Medieval ignorance and barbarity would seem to indicate retrogression rather than progression. Perrault's spokesman, given the title of l'Abbé, answers this question by explaining that progress in learning is not always continuous and that cultural hiatuses occur under certain conditions before movement forward resumes. During the course of this explanation he mentions the three ideas with which we are concerned:

Quand on dit que les derniers temps doivent l'emporter sur ceux qui les precedent, cela se doit entendre quand d'ailleurs toutes choses sont pareilles, car lors qu'il survient de grandes & longues guerres qui ravagent un païs, que les hommes sont obligez d'abandonner toutes sortes d'estudes pour se renfermer dans le soin pressant de deffendre leur vie; lorsque ceux qui ont vû commencer la guerre sont morts & qu'il vient une nouvelle generation qui n'a esté eslevée que dans le maniement des armes, il n'est pas estrange que les Arts & les Sciences s'évanoüissent pour un temps & qu'on voye regner en leur place l'ignorance & la barbarie. On peut comparer alors les sciences & les arts à ces fleuves qui viennent à rencontrer un gouffre où ils s'abisment tout à coup; mais qui après avoir coulé sous terre, dans l'estenduë de quelques Provinces trouvent enfin une ouverture, par où on les en voit ressortir avec la mesme abondance qu'ils y estoient entrez. Les ouvertures par où les Sciences & les Arts reviennent sur la Terre sont les regnes heureux des grands Monarques, qui en restablissant le calme & le repos dans leurs Etats y font refleurir toutes les belles connoissances. Ansi ce n'est pas assez qu'un siecle soit posterieur à un autre pour estre plus excellent, il faut qu'il soit dans la prosperité & dans le calme, ou s'il y a quelque guerre qu'elle ne se fasse qu'au dehors. Il faut encore que ce calme & cette prosperité durent long temps afin que le siecle ait le loisir de monter comme par degrez à sa derniere perfection.<sup>2</sup>

Perrault establishes the analogy between art, as well as science, and subterranean rivers by saying directly, "On peut comparer alors les sciences & les arts à ces fleuves. ..." While Coleridge is by no means explicit in indicating the meaning of the river Alph, most readers would agree that the poem concerns artistic creativity, that the river is central to this concern, and that, therefore, Coleridge's use of the Alph shares something in common with Perrault's rhetorical purpose in comparing arts and sciences with such rivers.

In order for these cultural rivers to appear, Perrault believes an age must be "dans la prosperité & dans le calme," and just such conditions exist in Xanadu:

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. (3)

Furthermore, according to Perrault these times of prosperity and calm occur during the reigns of great monarchs: "Les ouvertures par où les Sciences & les Arts reviennent sur la Terre sont les regnes heureux des grands Monarques, qui en restablissant le calme & le repos dans leurs Etats y font refleurir toutes les belles connoissances." Here the parallel is obviously with Kubla Khan, who presides over Xanadu.

When Perrault's rivers emerge from subterranean depths, they do so “avec la mesme abondance qu'ils y estoient entrez.” Coleridge's “mighty fountain” is similarly forceful in its flooding:

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.

An explanation for the sudden and abundant flooding of these rivers may be Abbé Du Bos's comment that “the arts attain to their highest degree of elevation by a sudden progress, and ... the effects of moral causes cannot carry them to that point of perfection, to which they seem to have spontaneously risen.”<sup>4</sup> Such an idea, at any rate, accords very closely with the Romantic belief in the spontaneous overflowing of creativity.

Even as Perrault's rivers suddenly emerge to the surface, so do they no less precipitantly sink beneath it when they “viennent à rencontrer un gouffre où ils s'abissent tout à coup. ...” In like manner the Alph “reached the caverns measureless to man, / And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean. ...” Also, both Perrault and Coleridge associate the disappearance of these rivers with warfare. For Perrault rivers of learning become submerged during “grandes & longues guerres qui ravagent un païs” because men must neglect knowledge while attending to the pressing needs of survival. The relationship between the descent of the Alph and warfare is not as explicitly causal, but there is a direct connection between the two, for immediately after we are told that the river “sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean,” we learn that “mid this tumult Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war!”

Despite the many similarities, I am not suggesting that Perrault's *Parallèle* is a source for Coleridge's “Kubla Khan,” or perhaps I should say that it is not a direct source. It might, instead, be considered an indirect source inasmuch as it incorporates the same traditional ideas upon which Coleridge drew in writing his poem. Let us now look at how the tradition of these ideas continued from the time of Perrault onward.

## II

In 1745, roughly midway between Perrault's *Parallèle* and Coleridge's “Kubla Khan,” Germain Boffrand (1667-1754) likened the architectural principles of antiquity to a subterranean river in order to explain how those principles sank into oblivion during the Middle Ages but reappeared during the Renaissance. Boffrand, a French architectural writer and teacher, made the comparison in his *Livre d'Architecture*: “Rome admit les principes établis par les Grecs; Mais ils se sont perdus pendant plusieurs siècles, comme un fleuve, qui après avoir arrosé plusieurs compagnes, les abandonne, & se perd dans un abîme, d'où il sort pour favoriser une autre contrée, & y répandre l'abondance.”<sup>5</sup> Boffrand, one should note, uses the analogy as did Perrault to account for the disappearance of classical art in medieval times and its reappearance in the Renaissance.

Slightly over a hundred years later, an Englishman named T. F. Marshall read a paper at the Institute of Fine Arts in which he developed at somewhat greater length a similar analogy. Marshall's subject is art generally rather than architecture particularly, and he uses the analogy to explain the disappearance of good art between the Reformation and the Victorian era rather than between antiquity and the Renaissance. This latter view, incidentally, was typical of those in the nineteenth century who favored the revival of medieval art and who scorned neoclassic art as corrupt and artificial. Marshall also cites a specific river, but the general tenor of his remarks corresponds quite closely to Perrault's and Boffrand's. The “stream of art,” Marshall explains,

seems to remind one of that remarkable phenomenon which occurs in the course of a beautiful river of southern Europe, of which travellers relate, that after it has gathered its rapid and abundant waters from the mountain heights, and poured them in graceful windings

through the valleys of Carniola, on the confines of Austria, spreading beauty and fertility on every side,—it suddenly,—and without any apparent cause, takes an abrupt turn, and plunging precipitately into a cavern that yawns to receive it, disappears at once in the profound abyss. After being traced to some distance within the grotto of Adelsburg, it is altogether lost to view; but, wonderful to relate, though lost to sight, it still exists, for, at a few leagues distance, *it reappears*, suddenly bursting from the earth, not an infant stream, but a full-grown river, and rejoicing in its recovered freedom, flows on without interruption till it reaches the sea.

Gentlemen, it was just so with the *stream of art*, and shall I say that it has been reserved for the present age to witness its emancipation, and that, after three centuries of obscurity, it emerges once more to light, and life, and liberty?<sup>6</sup>

The river described by Marshall is the Laibach, which takes in fact two subterranean courses. It begins in the Karst region, where it is known as the Poik, submerges and flows through the Adelsberg grotto, surfaces near Planina, where it is known as the Unz, submerges once again, and appears at last on the surface near Oberlaibach.

One hundred years separate Marshall's use of the subterranean river as an analogy to art from Boffrand's use of it in a similar way, with Coleridge's poem midway between the two. It is surely improbable that the traditional use of the analogy should, like the river itself, have plunged into oblivion in 1745 and remained in the collective subconsciousness of the age until it suddenly emerged from the depths of memory in 1848. Indeed, a similar though not identical use of the river image by Wordsworth suggests that the tradition continued without interruption during these hundred years. At the end of *The Prelude* Wordsworth retrospectively considers the development of his imagination, and, in doing so, likens the main subject of his poem to a stream that flows, drops from sight, and finally rises to the surface again:

From the blind cavern whence is faintly heard  
Its natal murmur; followed it to light  
And open day; accompanied its course  
Among the ways of Nature, for a time  
Lost sight of it bewildered and engulfed;  
Then given it greeting as it rose once more  
In strength. ...

we have traced the stream

(XIV, 194-201)

This passage varies from the others by using the river to describe the imagination instead of art, but it resembles the others as nearly as cause resembles effect since Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics all regarded the imagination as the supreme, if not the sole, source of art. There is here, then, only a slight variation on the traditional idea of art being like a subterranean river.

There is one last passage that, although not a part of the tradition we have been tracing, nevertheless suggests by its similarity to the poem the same sort of interpretation of “Kubla Khan” indicated by these passages illustrating the tradition. This interpretation, it should now be clear, is that the poem has to do with the intermittent progress of art in general. The passage to which I refer appeared anonymously in *Arnold's Library of the Fine Arts* in 1833 and is an early effort to define classicism and Romanticism by opposing them to each other. It begins with a description of classicism:

The classical presents to the eye an assemblage of chosen beauties; it is a stately garden, smiling with all that Art can offer; studded with the most costly exotics, where lengthened

avenues, adorned with temples and fountains, and enriched by the most rare works of sculpture, lure the eye with their interminable vistas and grateful shade. All that antiquity can boast is scattered over this enchanting spot; and what with graceful piles of the most sparkling marble, spacious balconies, deep alcoves, fragrant bowers, and vast pools sparkling to the fountain's stream, the sense unconsciously imbibes refinement, and forfeits its original rudeness.

This part of the description corresponds to the first eleven lines of the poem: the “stately garden” of the one to “gardens bright with sinuous rills” of the other, the “costly exotics” and “fragrant bowers” of the one to “many an incense-bearing tree” of the other, the “temples” and “graceful piles of the most sparkling marble” of the one to the “stately pleasure-dome” of the other, and the “fountain's stream” of the one to “Alph, the sacred river” of the other.

The writer then proceeds to describe Romanticism:

Let us now seek the realms of Romanticism: the scene becomes more severe; the delicacies of Art yield to the wildness of nature, and we feel our former boldness return. We behold a deep sequestered dell, whence the blue vault is seen to gleam at an immeasurable altitude. Caverns yawn around, save where the tufted trees congregate in unstudied variety, forming black and irregular masses against the bright sky and snowy clouds. The roaring of a cataract, as it dashes impetuously from rock to rock, appals the mind, as it dwells on the savage wildness of the scene.<sup>7</sup>

This part is a parallel to lines 11-28 of the poem: the “deep sequestered dell” to the “deep romantic chasm,” the yawning “caverns” to the “caverns measureless to man,” the “roaring of a cataract, as it dashes impetuously from rock to rock” to “mid these dancing rocks at once and ever / It flung up momentarily the sacred river,” and the “savage wildness of the scene” to the “savage place.”

All of these similarities indicate that Coleridge's poem deals with art generally in its two primary divisions of classical and Romantic, and this conclusion does not depend much on whether the author of this article had “Kubla Khan” in mind. If he did not, then the conclusion might be slightly strengthened by the existence of a customary habit of perception, but if he did, then the conclusion would still be valid as evidence of contemporary interpretation.

The notion that peace favors art and that war discourages art, the second idea with which we are concerned, may be traced back to antiquity, where it appears in Tacitus, Virgil, and Longinus. To follow the tradition from a later date, however, we might begin with Abraham Cowley, who stated in 1656, over thirty years before Perrault's *Parallèle*, “a warlike, various and tragical age is best to *write of*, but worst to *write in*.” Cowley elaborates upon this statement by adding that poetry requires “serenity and cheerfulness of *Spirit*” and that “it must, like the *Halcyon*, have fair weather to breed in.”<sup>8</sup> To gain this tranquillity and to escape the vexations of the world, Cowley declares his intention to retire to “our American Plantations,” where he hopes to find peace and the consolations of literature and philosophy. This desire, incidentally, reminds one of Coleridge's part in Southey's plan for a pantisocracy on the banks of the Susquehanna and of his hopes for finding “(Free from the ills which here our peace destroy) / Content and Bliss on Transatlantic shore” (“On the Prospect of Establishing a Pantisocracy in America,” 1794).

In 1690 Sir William Temple, Swift's friend and employer, repeated the notion of war militating against art although he did not go so far as to betray any interest in American plantations or pantisocracies. In the past one hundred years, Temple wrote in *An Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning*, Christendom has been continually beset with wars, and “the noise and disorders thereof have been ever the most capital Enemies of the *Muses*, who are seated by the ancient Fables upon the tops of Parnassus, that is, in a place of safety and

quiet from the reach of all noises and disturbances of the Regions below.”<sup>9</sup>

About thirty years later, Jean Baptiste (Abbé) Du Bos (1670-1742) provided a somewhat different version of the idea in his *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music* when he discussed the effects of war, not on artists directly, but on the audience. In times of war, Du Bos wrote, people are more concerned with the basic necessities of life than with the pleasures of art, and art, he implied, cannot flourish without a receptive audience:

Is it possible for the countrymen of great artists to give such attention to the polite arts, as may promote their success, unless they happen to live at a time when they are allowed to be more attentive to their pleasures than wants? Now this general attention to pleasure, supposes a long train of years exempt from those inquietudes and fears which are the general consequence of war, at least such as may endanger the estates and fortunes of particulars, by aiming at the subversion of the constitution of which they are members.<sup>10</sup>

Du Bos cites the Romans as an example of people who were not interested in art while defending the republic but who turned to art only after the threat to the homeland was removed and wars were fought in distant countries.

Perrault had remarked that “s’il y a quelque guerre qu’elle ne se fasse qu’au dehors.” He had also mentioned the need for a long peace (“Il faut encore que ce calme & cette prospérité durent long temps”) just as Du Bos writes that interest in pleasure “supposes a long train of years” of peace. And finally, Perrault had pointed out how in times of war security overrides all other interests: “les hommes sont obligez d’abandonner toutes sortes d’estudes pour se renfermer dans le soin pressant de deffendre leur vie.” The primacy of basic needs over pleasures, by the way, was a common premise in histories of civilization. Primitive peoples, the argument went, attended first to the demands of survival and of everyday life, and only when they had satisfied these did they indulge in art.

The oldest and most prevalent of the ideas we are working with was, then, a firmly established tradition by the time Coleridge's contemporary, Blake, wrote in his atypically assertive and categorical way, “Rome & Greece swept Art into their maw & destroy'd it; a Warlike State never can produce Art.”<sup>11</sup> The opposition of war to art is, furthermore, an idea present in a number of Coleridge's works. I have already mentioned one of the Pantisocracy sonnets as an example, but in another sonnet on the same subject, entitled simply “Pantisocracy,” and in such other poems as “Domestic Peace,” “Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement,” and “Fears in Solitude,” Coleridge celebrates the pleasures of serene retirement as opposed to the vexations of worldly involvement. It is a theme that would preoccupy Matthew Arnold some years later and one that descends directly from Cowley's and Temple's statements about the importance of peace to the poet. However, more in line with the comments of Perrault and Du Bos about a nation's having leisure for art only when relieved of cares for survival are the 1814 essays, “On the Principles of Genial Criticism concerning the Fine Arts.” In 1814 Europe was at peace, temporarily as it happened, after long years of war, and the editor of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* announced Coleridge's essays with these words: “The termination of the calamities of war having at length furnished us with more vacant room than we have for years been accustomed to find unoccupied, it is our intention, next week, to diversify our columns by the commencement of a series of Essays upon the Fine Arts. ...”<sup>12</sup> Although the editor by his unhappy phrasing seems to regard the forthcoming essays as little more than fillers, there is nevertheless some significance in his turning to the fine arts immediately upon the cessation of fighting. When Coleridge takes up the idea in his introduction to the first essay, he makes clearer the association between peace and art:

And how can he [the writer] hail and celebrate the return of peace more worthily or more appropriately, than by exerting his best faculties to direct the taste and affections of his readers to the noblest works of peace? The tranquillity of nations permits our patriotism to

repose. We are now allowed to think and feel as men, for all that may confer honor on human nature. ...<sup>13</sup>

It is appropriate that with the arrival of peace a writer should draw the attention of his readers to the fine arts because the arts are “the noblest works of peace,” and this attention is now possible because the welfare of the country no longer requires the patriotism of its people. This passage is, then, close to the comments by Perrault and Du Bos, and also an obverse prose analogue to the “voices prophesying war” that coincide with the disappearance of the river of art in “Kubla Khan.”

The last and least of the three ideas is that great rulers establish the periods of stability and peace necessary to art. In addition to Perrault's remark that “Les ouvertures par où les Sciences & les Arts reviennent sur la Terre sont les regnes heureux des grands Monarques, qui en restablissant le calme & le repos dans leur Etats y font refleurir toutes les belles connoissances,” there is evidence for this tradition in Leonard Welsted's “A Dissertation Concerning the Perfection of the English Language, the State of Poetry, etc.” (1724). Welsted, a minor writer of the early eighteenth century, writes that in the reign of William III, “the founder of English liberty” as he calls him, the arts rose vigorously and have continued to advance since that time. He then expresses his optimism for further progress by asking,

May it not ... be reasonably hoped that the peace, the happiness, the universal quiet and tranquillity which Great Britain and all Europe enjoys under the influence of His Majesty's [George I] councils will have such happy consequences for all the studies of humanity as may, in time, and under just encouragements, bring them to that standard or perfection which denominates a classical age?<sup>14</sup>

Beyond encouraging art indirectly by creating a peaceful environment conducive to its growth, great rulers could also nourish it directly through patronage. In his *Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning*, Sir William Temple laid down two conditions for the advancement of art and knowledge. The first, as we have seen, is the absence of war; the second is the “Favour in great Kings and Princes to encourage or applaud it [learning].” In the Renaissance such rulers as Francis I, Charles V, and Henry VIII patronized the arts, but since those reigns, Temple laments, “I have not observed in our modern Story any Great Princes much Celebrated for their Favour of Learning, further than to serve their turns. ...”<sup>15</sup> Both the time of absolute monarchs and that of aristocratic patronage were coming to an end during Coleridge's lifetime, but within easy memory was the indifference, not to say antipathy, of George II to art, and in Coleridge's own time there was the very opposite attitude of George III, who actively supported learning and the arts. At any rate, the tradition was alive enough for Coleridge to incorporate it in the figure of Kubla Khan, who rules a serene and tranquil Xanadu and who decrees the building of the “stately pleasure-dome.”

### III

We are now prepared to consider what effect these three ideas have on an interpretation of the poem, and since the first two ideas are the most important, it is they that exert the most influence. The traditional analogy of art to a subterranean river indicates that the symbolical value of the Alph is art generally. The anonymous article's description of classicism as serene and artificial and of Romanticism as tumultuous and natural expands the presentation of art in the poem to include the pleasure-dome and gardens, thus enabling the reader to interpret the first part of the poem, lines 1-28, as a representation of the whole of Western art divided into its two primary forms, classicism and Romanticism. This art exists under the patronage and peaceful reign of Kubla Khan. But art cannot prosper in times of war, which is why the Alph plunges to the caverns at the moment that Kubla hears the voices foretelling war and why the entire vision of Xanadu vanishes at this time. In broad terms, therefore, “Kubla Khan” expresses Coleridge's fear that war will bring an end to artistic creativity. Let it be remembered that in 1798, when Coleridge wrote “Kubla Khan,” he also wrote “Fears in Solitude,” subtitled “Written in April 1798, during the Alarm of an Invasion.” In the preceding year the



French had landed fourteen hundred troops in Wales, and Wordsworth and Coleridge had been suspected by the government of reconnoitering possible invasion sites in northern Somerset. The following year Coleridge's fears were partially realized by the landing of another small French force, this time in Ireland to support a rebellion. In short, it seemed to Coleridge in 1798 that a once remote war was now beginning to threaten the very shores of England, and this new threat might well have prompted him to recall the traditional opposition of war to art and to incorporate the idea in his poem.

In putting this interpretation so baldly I do not mean to oversimplify the poem or to exclude other readings, for I am mindful of Coleridge's own criteria of suggestiveness and of multēity in unity. Rather, I am describing one element in the poem, which, like a single thread, enriches the multicolored design of the whole fabric. Neither do I mean to oversimplify the way in which this element came to Coleridge and his poem, for literary influences are often subtle and complicated. It is sometimes necessary to simplify in order to explain, but one should always remember that the influence, and the pursuit of it, are complicated by vagaries and uncertainties. As André Morize has written, the study of influences

Frequently ... consists in following the capricious unexpected meanderings of a stream whose waters are led hither and thither by the accidental contour of the ground and take their color from the various tributaries and the soil through which they flow—at times even disappearing from view for a space, to reappear farther on.<sup>16</sup>

### Notes

1. Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), p. 77.
2. Charles Perrault, *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes en ce qui Regarde les Arts et les Sciences* (Paris: n.p., 1688), pp. 52-54.
3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 297. All quotations from Coleridge's poems are from this edition.
4. Abbè Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music*, 5th ed., trans. Thomas Nugent (London: John Nourse, 1748), II, p. 128. The first French edition was published in 1719.
5. Germain Boffrand, *Livre d'Architecture contenant les Principes Generaux de cet Art, et les Plans, Elevations et Profils de quelques-un des Batimens Faits en France & dans les Pays Etrangers* (Paris, 1745; rpt. Farnborough, Hants.: Gregg International Publishers Ltd., 1969), p. 6.
6. T. F. Marshall, "On the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Art in Italy, and Its Revival in England in the Present Day," *The Builder*, 6 (1848), p. 243.
7. "Classicality and Romanticism," *Arnold's Library of the Fine Arts*, 1 (1833), pp. 189-90.
8. Abraham Cowley, "Preface" to *Poems*, 1656; rpt. in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn, II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), p. 80.
9. Sir William Temple, *An Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning*, 1690; rpt. in Spingarn, III (1909), p. 45.
10. Du Bos, II, p. 97.
11. William Blake, "On Homer's Poetry & on Virgil," in *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 778.
12. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 1814; quoted in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), II, p. 305.
13. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "On the Principles of Genial Criticism concerning the Fine Arts"; rpt. in Shawcross, II, p. 220.
14. Leonard Welsted, "A Dissertation concerning the Perfection of the English Language, the State of Poetry, etc.," 1724; rpt. in *Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays*, ed. Scott Elledge (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1961), I, p. 322.
15. Temple, III, pp. 68-69.

## Criticism: John Beer (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: "The Languages of *Kubla Khan*" in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*, edited by Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 220-62.

[In the following essay, Beer interprets "*Kubla Khan*" as a ferment of competing languages that dramatize the conflicts the author felt.]

A close reading of *Kubla Khan* makes one aware of an irresolution in the imagery which stands in marked contrast to the homogeneity of the verse. Throughout the poem there runs a strong incantatory strain, within which we become aware of an ingenious poetic language. The feminine rhymes in the second, third and fourth stanzas bring in a lightness and variation which is regularly superseded by a powerful and strong iambic movement. The effect of inevitability becomes stronger each time, until the final lines of the last stanza, which have the quality of a charm.

There is, however, a contrast of effect between the rhythmic movement of the verse, impressive in the subtlety of its patterning, and the visual imagery of the poem, which is not only hard to fix into a landscape pattern but is constantly contracting and expanding in the mind, moving between pictures of an objectively visible scene and suggestions of vast unseizable subterranean spaces and forces.

As a result, the reception of the poem will vary according to the degree of submission to its more 'enchanted' aspects. One can allow one's mind to be taken over by its rhythm, while contemplating the shifting landscapes described and suggested as one might in a dream. As soon as the conscious mind takes over, on the other hand, questions will begin to pose themselves. It will then become obvious that the poem also has the arbitrariness and reductive economy of much dream work. The fact that a Greek river is flowing through a Tartar landscape, with an Abyssinian maid somewhere in the background, may not be particularly troubling, for the mind can deal easily with such superpositions; but the 'sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice' may seem all too convenient and rounded a package for the amount of symbolic freight that it seems by then to be carrying. We know from Coleridge's notebooks that he had been attracted by the account of an image of ice in an Indian cave which waxed and waned in accord with the waxing and waning of the moon—a marvellous piece of symbolism for correspondences of process between nature and the human mind; but since this idea is not presented in the text of the poem itself it cannot be explored except by subsequent association. Equally, we may suspect that the genius of the last stanza is, like other such figures, standing on a mountain top, and that somewhere in that landscape there is a self-renewing spring of inspiration to counter the disordered fountain of stanza two—but again these are elements to be inferred by the reader from clues such as the honey-dew, not to be found directly presented in the text. At such points, therefore, we glimpse that this poem is inviting a different reading from those to which modern criticism usually points us—a reading which will treat the language of the poem as a threshold which we cross to enter into an imaginative world corresponding to Coleridge's own at the time when he wrote the poem. That world is constructed partly in alignment with mythological symbolisms which Coleridge himself had been exploring; but it is also in intimate relationship with the landscapes of the writers who meant most to him when he was thinking in visionary terms. To explore the poem to its depths, therefore, is to become aware of various poetical languages: some largely symbolic, arising from the mythological constructions of previous civilizations, some verbal, echoing relevant passages in writers whom Coleridge valued. As the poet's work is done, all play together in a structure which is larger than that of the presented text.

### THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH AND SYMBOL

The text of the Crewe manuscript<sup>1</sup> (reprinted above, p. 219) is the closest we have to that of *Kubla Khan* as it was originally written down. For the purpose of the present discussion I shall assume that that original writing took place during a walking tour to the Valley of Rocks in the late autumn of 1797, and that when he composed it Coleridge was in a state of less than complete consciousness. I have elsewhere<sup>2</sup> presented the case for making such assumptions and attempted a reconstruction of the conversations that might have taken place between Wordsworth and Coleridge as they left Porlock and passed through the woods beyond (specifically mentioned by Dorothy Wordsworth in a letter on that occasion), emerging from time to time to see splendid views across the Bristol Channel to the mountains of Wales. Issues of life and death might well have preoccupied them as they observed and discussed the country around them and perhaps began evolving ideas for the landscape of seasonless death in *The Wanderings of Cain*. The rocks lying scattered in the Valley of Stones, equally, might have directed their minds to the destructive power of the earth, resisting all attempts to recreate an earthly paradise. And so (to continue the reconstruction) when Coleridge was taken ill on the return journey and retired to a lonely farmhouse, the scene was set for a meditation on the nature of earthly powers, whether in the world outside or within the individual.

One other point may be noted. If the retirement was to Ash Farm, the place that fits Coleridge's description best, it was an area of unusual magnificence, from which the enclosed valley which surrounds Culbone stretches down to the sea.<sup>3</sup> It is even possible that Coleridge knew something of the history of the place: how Ash Farm, along with the vale as a whole, had been repossessed in the middle of the eighteenth century by its owner, who had proceeded to cultivate it. Earlier it had been for many years a place of banishment, for lepers and others, and then inhabited by discharged servants from India, who moved about it burning charcoal for the rising metal industries of the country. English charcoal-burners were still at work there in the late 1790s.<sup>4</sup> To this day it is an unusually peaceful and even magical place—even though it differs in equally obvious ways from the language of Coleridge's poem.

But whatever the effect of the actual visible landscape on Coleridge's mind as he came to compose his poem, there can be no doubt that other landscapes were already there, imprinted during his reading of mythology and travel and associated with his more esoteric speculations. Indeed if Coleridge's retirement to the lonely farmhouse took place during the return from the November visit to the Valley of Rocks, at a time when the two poets were actively planning *The Wanderings of Cain*, it would also be natural to suppose (in view of the philological habits of mythologists at that time)<sup>5</sup> that Coleridge's sight of the words 'In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace'<sup>6</sup> evoked an immediate connection between Can and Cain. And in that case a number of connections in the poem become more readily explicable. For Cain is a natural emblem of the daemon in humanity turned to destruction. As the son of Adam in whom the Fall is realized, he knows that all men must now die; although he has never experienced Paradise he has learned what it was like and knows that he cannot regain it. The desperation of his plight is displayed both in the murder of his brother and in subsequent attempts to recreate lost paradise. In eighteenth-century lore, it was commonly supposed that the widespread cults of sun-worship and enclosures sacred to the sun had been initiated by Cain and his descendants in their attempts to recreate the Eden that had been lost. Later, in the persons of Tubalcain and his descendants, the enterprise became centred in the working of metals, with all the ambiguity implied by an activity that could involve the making either of weapons or of agricultural implements—or for that matter of musical instruments.<sup>7</sup> As the activity of creation goes on, sometimes manic in its intensity, the ultimate aim is always to recreate and repossess a former state of wholeness—a state which, though lost, is still sensed in the subconscious.

With the central myth of Cain and his ambiguous activities, two further mythological strains can be connected. The first is the myth of Isis and Osiris, in which the idea of the lost glory is further elaborated into the loss of Osiris and the usurpation of the sun by the destructive Typhon, while Isis undertakes incessant wanderings in the hope of recreating her lover. If Osiris were ever to be recreated by Isis Typhon would be vanquished and disappear, but since she cannot discover his virile member, her work must always be defeated, her unsuccessful quest being imaged in the waxing and waning of the moon. So the world remains trapped

between the workings of a destructive sun and a deprived moon which reaches the form of plenitude only to lose it again. Were Osiris to be revived, on the other hand, the world would be dominated by a sun that united heat and light creatively, as imaged in the figuration of sun-gods such as Apollo, deity of healing and music.

The dialectic implicit in the Osiris and Isis myth (for it is the heat of Typhon and the light of Isis that would be blended in the restored Osiris) becomes focussed on the male-female relationship in the myth of Alpheus and Arethusa. There was an enclosure sacred to the sun by the river Alpheus in Greece, but the main myth connected with Alpheus himself was of his search for the nymph Arethusa: when he rediscovered her they rose up blended in the Arethusa fountain in Sicily.<sup>8</sup>

Once the running together of these myths and others is seen to provide the main structure of meaning in the poem, it becomes possible to understand how a Tartar paradise can associate so readily with a Greek sacred river. The paradisaic imagery in the remainder of the first stanza may also be seen as precisely apt—for most of the elements mentioned, the sacred river, the enclosure, the incense-bearing trees and the sunny spots—are traditionally associated with sun-worship.<sup>9</sup> In the second stanza, by contrast, all that is ambivalent in such traditions comes to the fore: the fountain is destructive, the woman is separated from the daemon-lover who still attracts her, nature is distorted and humanity doomed to war. A miraculous reconciling of the various elements—fire and ice, earth and water, sunny dome and cave of ice, river of life and sea of death, is imaged in the music created by the echo of the fountain in the cave—but imaged only. It is not until the final stanza that the possibility of a true reconciliation is glimpsed in the figure of the restored sun-god who reconciles everything into harmony. The Abyssinian maid can be identified as a priestess of Isis, Abyssinia being the abode of secret wisdom as well as the site of the Nile springs. The poet creating his dome in air reminds us of Apollo, building with his music a temple that all could see.<sup>10</sup> But although the scene closes with the genius having tasted paradisaic elements of honey-dew and milk (suggesting the original paradisaic spring of which all earthly fountains are pale copies), there is still a wistfulness in ‘Could I revive within me ...’: the scene figures an aspiration, not an accomplished fact. In one sense the poem ends triumphantly, for the images of honey-dew and milk consummate the various streams of mythological imagery involved, including the food of the Old Testament Messiah who will redeem man from Cain’s condition as well as that of many pagan gods.<sup>11</sup> There is also however insubstantiality in a vision that seems to last only so long as the musician is there to make it and convince his audience. The concluding sense is of harmony, not of loss, but that harmonization is shot through with fragility.

I have written at greater length about this elsewhere, bringing together more evidence for the establishing of such mythological links, and for Coleridge’s knowledge of the traditions involved. I have also argued that the various ideas are further held together by the imagery and lore of genius, that favourite eighteenth-century theme, so that when we think of sun and moon or of spring and river, we are really looking at aspects of the daemonic, where constructive and destructive factors are working together in creation or falling apart in destructiveness and loss. With the aid of such interlinking themes, I have argued, Coleridge was able to bring together some of the issues that he had been contemplating in his more esoteric investigations, presenting back to himself a satisfying image of his own aspirations. Such lore as I have come across since I first wrote on the subject has helped to support and further delineate this pattern. A possible strand which I had overlooked was pointed out by Richard Gerber, who drew attention to the resemblance between Cybele (Kubele) in Greek mythology and Cubla (Kubla).<sup>12</sup> The sight of Cubla’s first name, he suggests, might well have aroused this run of imagery, also, in Coleridge’s mind. Cybele is earth-goddess, but an earth-goddess associated rather with destruction than with growing; the cults of priests devoted to her drove themselves into frenzies; her common depiction was with a crown of walls and towers, suggesting military defence. If the disorders of the second stanza are seen as evidences of her powers manically and destructively in action, her presence not only gives another dimension to the ‘walls and towers’ that Kubla decrees but adds to the suggestion of sun-worship the need to propitiate fearful elements in earthly nature. The combination of Cybele and Cain in the name of Cubla Can would thus initiate the cross-currents of self-assertion and vengeance in the poem still more vigorously.

In all these ways the poem emerges as a structure of images and symbols by which a complex interpretation of human experience—and especially of the daemonic element in that experience—is being suggested. Yet this perception does not give us the whole poem. To some degree the images clothe themselves naturally in Coleridge's words, yet we are some way from seeing why particular patterns of language and metre and particular choices of words should have emerged. The discussion so far assumes that Coleridge's mythological interests did not begin when he sat down to write his poem but had long been a feature of his thinking. When, after all, he had claimed to his brother at the age of eighteen, 'I may justly plume myself that I first have drawn the nymph Mathesis from the visionary caves of abstracted idea, and caused her to unite with Harmony. The first-born of this Union I now present to you ...', he was already exploring imagery which reappears in the last stanza of *Kubla Khan* (CL, I, p. 7). This was not the only language he had learned to speak, however: he had also been devouring and assimilating the work of previous poets and writers who worked in similar ways. Their language can be seen behind his, evidencing a series of poetic relationships, some intimately detailed, others strong but general, which call for further examination.

To carry it out will involve the pursuit of literary echoes, in a manner that has been much used in connection with *Kubla Khan*. There is a well-known tradition for such studies, established by John Livingston Lowes, whereby one finds a previous use of a striking word (which is then printed in italics) [I shall do this myself and to avoid confusion silently suppress italics in the original texts.] and presents it in connection with the corresponding line in *Kubla Khan*, where the word is also italicized.<sup>13</sup> (In Lowes's case, however, one finds that many of the usages he cites could be duplicated several times from other travel-books, so that cases he notes often prove simply to be striking instances of a more general imagery.)

I have discussed elsewhere some of the problems raised by this kind of work, pointing out the hazards of trying to establish with precision rules for pursuing influences from one work to another, but also proposing as a simple rule of thumb that coincidence is less likely to be at work if one can trace a phrase rather than a single word, or if a number of echoes from a previous writer rather than a single one, seem to be at work.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, I concentrate here on authors who are known to have impressed Coleridge deeply in youth, and look for clusters of usage rather than single, isolated words. It is a further element among my assumptions that where such words recur what is likely to be at work is not just a simple distinguishable 'echo' but a whole context, informing particular words with recollection of the larger matrix of meaning in which they originally appeared. There is always a danger that such arguments will become circular, obviously, but readers who care to check my method by looking up important words in writers not mentioned will find it harder than they may expect to establish rival patterns of previous usage. Shakespeare, for instance, uses many of the words to be found in the poem, yet I have traced in his work no pattern or cluster of usages that is particularly significant for *Kubla Khan*.

## THE LANGUAGE OF GENIUS AND SENSUOUSNESS

Insofar as the symbolism of *Kubla Khan* can be seen to bring together various strands of mythology and traditions of interpretation from the past, its interest is inevitably limited for a modern reader, who has ceased to assign supreme authority to the Bible as a historical record. In such terms it may look at best like the poetry of an inspired comparative mythology, written by a happier Mr Casaubon. But there is more to the matter than that. Just as Blake at this time was trying to forge a new mythology for his age to replace what he thought of as an outworn and discredited Christianity, Coleridge valued the myths of antiquity less for themselves than for what they suggested about the further possibilities of human creativity. They were to be read as embodying perennial traditions of human inspiration, of genius.

As such, these ideas had already had a long history in Coleridge's mind. They can be associated for example with his general interest in romance as a whole—an interest which had begun as a child with his early absorption in the *Arabian Nights*, and continued apparently throughout the reading of his childhood and youth, taking in first the popular fiction of the time such as *Tartarian Tales* and then, in adolescence,

imaginative philosophers such as the Neoplatonists and visionary mystics such as Jacob Boehme.<sup>15</sup>

When we turn to Coleridge's earlier poems we find many examples of words and images that look forward to his most visionary poem, but we also notice a particularly significant cluster around the year 1793. This had been a year both of pleasure and disaster for Coleridge. The trial of William Frend in the Senate House had been an exciting event in Cambridge, followed by a Long Vacation in the West Country where he had enjoyed some lively company. It was then, probably, that he helped prepare for the Society of Gentlemen in Exeter the paper (described in *Biographia Literaria*)<sup>16</sup> in the course of which he compared Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden* to the Russian palace of ice, 'glittering, cold and transitory', and 'assigned sundry reasons, chiefly drawn from a comparison of passages in the Latin poets with the original Greek, from which they were borrowed, for the preference of Collins's odes to those of Gray'. His attitude to Erasmus Darwin was not one of complete dismissal of course: for years afterwards his poems would be touched by images that he had come across in the *Botanic Garden*, while *Zoönomia* would help stimulate his thinking about the nature of life.<sup>17</sup> Rather, Coleridge was seeking to extend Darwin's achievement, to find a way of writing about scientific matters in verse which would reconcile them with other themes: theology, politics, the human mind. Evidences of this quest can be found both in his reading and in his early poetry. At times, however, it was the quality of the aspiration itself, as celebrated by his more rhapsodic poetic predecessors, that possessed him. Already in 1748 there had appeared Thomson's *Castle of Indolence*, in which the bard roused those who would listen with the strings of his harp, 'The which with skilful touch he deftly strung, / Till tinkling in clear *symphony* they rung ...'. With the aid of the muses he had then sung to the ten thousands thronging mute around him a song which included the invocation,

'Come to the beaming God your hearts unfold!  
Draw from its fountain life! 'Tis thence alone  
We can excel. Up from unfeeling mould  
To seraphs burning round the Almighty's throne,  
Life rising still on life in higher tone  
Perfection forms, and with perfection bliss ...'

(II, xlvihi)

This sublimated sun-worship was matched by the elevation given to the divine intelligence by Mark Akenside, whose *Pleasures of Imagination* had appeared in its first version a year or two before. In both versions appeared the lines,

From Heav'n my strains begin: from Heaven  
descends  
The flame of genius to the human breast,  
And love, and beauty, and poetic joy,  
And inspiration.

(I, 55-8)

—to be followed by a long account of the ways in which the human mind could pursue the heavenly intelligence into all its intricate paths of creation. Nature had a particularly central part to play: to quote the first version,

Must fire the chosen genius; Nature's hand  
Must point the path, and imp his eagle-wings,  
Exulting o'er the painful steep, to soar  
High as the summit; there to breathe at large  
Æthereal air, with bards and sages old ...

(I, 37-42)<sup>18</sup>

In the first version, the aged sage Harmodius teaches the poet about the secrets of the universe, recalling a visionary experience in which the 'Genius of human kind' appeared before him in heavenly radiance. After the first pleasurable landscape there was a change of scene:

A solitary prospect, wide and wild,  
Rushed on my senses. 'Twas a horrid pile  
Of hills with many a shaggy forest mixed,  
With many a sable cliff and glittering stream.

The long description which follows contains few verbal parallels with the second stanza of *Kubla Khan*, yet there is a distinct resemblance of emblematic form, particularly in the movement from rough energetic water to calm stream:

Down the steep windings of the channeled rock  
Remurmuring, rushed the congregated floods  
With hoarser inundation; till at last  
They reached a glassy plain, which from the skirts  
Of that high desert spread her verdant lap,  
And drank the gushing moisture, where confined  
In one smooth current, o'er the liliated vale  
Clearer than glass it flowed.

In this vale, protected by the cliffs above, the sage also saw another sight:

I spied a fair pavilion, which diffused  
Its floating umbrage 'mid the silver shade  
Of osiers.

On the

As he looks at this scene, the sage sees a shaft of sunlight and learns that the pavilion, with its shadow on the waters, is 'the primeval seat / Of man', designed as a place where human youth can grow up nurtured by the goddess of wisdom—who is accompanied in turn by another goddess, the fair Euphrosyne. When the goddess of wisdom discovers that the young man is in fact attracted only to her companion she complains to the father-god, who replaces Euphrosyne with an avenging demon; the young man almost despairs. At this point, however, his goddess intervenes: he feels her inspiration 'Vehement, and swift / As lightning fires the aromatic shade / In Æthiopian fields', and with her help is roused to do combat; at once Euphrosyne appears again, promising never to leave him:

She ended; and the whole romantic scene  
Immediate vanished; rocks, and woods, and rills,  
The mantling tent, and each mysterious form ...

The sage awakes to be instructed by the moral of what he has seen: happiness will always accompany virtue—but only so long as virtue is followed for herself alone.<sup>19</sup>

The landscape, it must be repeated, bears little relation in strict verbal terms to that described in *Kubla Khan*: occasional 'rills' and 'rocks' feature in many other such passages. But in its general form, its pitting of savage scene against paradisaic plain, its rough waters and calm waters and its general moral that pleasure, if pursued directly for itself, will give rise to an avenging demon, whereas the following of virtue will be accompanied by true inspiration, it bears a strong resemblance to the structure of Coleridge's poem.

Coleridge knew Akenside well by 1796, voicing admiration then for his combination of ‘head and fancy’; his own philosophical poetry bears the touch of his influence at many points. He also imitated him in a poem dated tentatively in 1794, and it seems likely that he already knew him by 1793. In that year, however, his chief poetic heroes seem to have been the two figures mentioned in the *Biographia*: Gray and Collins.

Collins, certainly, was figuring strongly in his consciousness then: after he had met Miss Fanny Nesbitt while travelling in a coach, he had addressed several poems in his style to her. One of them, *On presenting a Moss Rose to Miss F. Nesbitt*, was actually written on the back flyleaves of a copy of Collins's *Poetical Works*.<sup>20</sup> His devotion that summer is further demonstrated by the poetic texture of his ‘Songs of the Pixies’. The lines which begin the fifth section, for instance,

When Evening's dusky car  
Crown'd with her dewy star

Steals o'er the fading sky in shadowy flight ...

condense various lines in Collins's ‘Ode to Evening’, such as

The Pensive Pleasures sweet  
Prepare thy shadowy Car

and

Thy Dewy fingers draw  
The gradual dusky Veil ...

The ‘fading sky’ echoes Gray's *Elegy*, ‘Now fades the glimmering landscape ...’ and Gray is actually quoted in the line, ‘A youthful Bard “unknown to fame”’.

Both Gray and Collins seem to be echoed in *Kubla Khan*. As John Ower has pointed out,<sup>21</sup> Gray's *Progress and Poesy*, which begins with an invocation to the ‘Aeolian lyre’, continues with a description of poetry imaged as a river:

From Helicon's harmonious springs  
A thousand rills their mazy progress take:  
The laughing flowers, that round them blow,  
Drink life and fragrance as they flow.  
Now, the rich stream of music winds along  
Deep, majestic, smooth, and strong,  
Thro' verdant vales, and Ceres's golden reign:  
Now rowling down the steep amain,  
Headlong, impetuous, see it pour:  
The rocks, and nodding groves rebellow to the roar.

Elsewhere in Gray's poem there is also a reference to fields ‘where *Maeander's* amber waves / In lingering Lab'rinth creep’. The landscape is not so close as in Akenside's poem, however, nor are the verbal reminiscences overwhelmingly convincing, since they could easily be matched elsewhere in the poetry of the period. The two most impressive elements are the fine management of the poetical movement and the use of such a landscape to describe not simply genius, but poetic genius. Coleridge was no doubt aware of Dr Johnson's harsh criticism of these lines in his *Lives of the Poets* (1781), but whatever common sense might say he was also likely to be touched by the seductive charms of their rhetoric. The attractiveness of Collins is displayed in a letter of 1796 to John Thelwall:

Now Collins' Ode on the poetical character—that part of it, I should say, beginning with—‘The Band (as faery Legends say) Was wove on that creating Day,’ has inspired &



whirled *me* along with greater agitations of enthusiasm than any the most *impassioned* Scene in Schiller or Shakespere ... Yet I consider the latter poetry as more valuable, because it gives *more general* pleasure—& I judge of all things by their Utility.—I feel strongly, and I think strongly; but I seldom feel without thinking, or think without feeling.

(*CL*, I, p. 279)

The poet who could write that had evidently been very powerfully drawn by Collins and in fact the lines he mentions have a close relevance to the ending of *Kubla Khan*. Published in 1747, they take to a further stage the imagery of genius projected by Akenside. Poetry is seen as having been born when the Creator, having made the world, retired with Fancy:

Seraphic Wires were heard to sound,  
Now sublimest Triumph swelling,  
Now on Love and Mercy dwelling;  
And she, from out the veiling cloud,  
Breath'd her magic Notes aloud.  
And Thou, Thou rich-hair'd Youth of Morn,  
And all thy subject Life was born! (22)

This image of a goddess inspiring with her song is followed by a concluding section, in which Milton is portrayed as the poet to have fulfilled the ideal of poetic genius, in a career never to be repeated by anyone else. By a neat stroke he is projected into a paradisaal scene like that which he himself created—an Eden which lies high on a rocky cliff, guarded by 'holy *Genii*'. I have quoted the lines elsewhere<sup>23</sup> and there is no point in trying to condense them, since it is not particular verbal resemblances that are in question here but the movement as a whole. Collins's verse, like Coleridge's, takes on the inevitability of an incantatory chant which undermines the sense of what is being said: a repetition of the miracle by which the inspired poet, hearing his 'native strains' from Heaven, reproduced them for his hearers is being pronounced impossible, but the ecstatic movement of the poem does not altogether confirm the pessimism of the statement.

The figure of the inspiring female and the inspired poet in his elevated paradise are clearly of significance for the final stanza of Coleridge's poem—the movement of which is still less ready to affirm the impossibility of regaining it. It is in another poem of Collins's, however, that we find the closest resemblances to Coleridge's poem. John Livingston Lowes long ago noted the significance of the singing of Melancholy as described in 'The Passions':

Thro' Glades and Glooms the mingled Measure stole,  
Or o'er some haunted Stream with fond Delay,  
And dashing soft from Rocks around  
Bubbling Runnels join'd the Sound;  
Round an holy Calm diffusing,  
Love of Peace, and lonely Musing,  
In hollow Murmurs died away. (24)

While the 'mingled Measure' gives Coleridge a key phrase for his third stanza, the movement of the lines as a whole contributes to the close of the second. Influences can be traced still further, in fact, since behind Collins's 'Thro' Glades and Glooms the mingled Measure stole' one may discern the shape of Dryden's 'Through all the *compass* of the notes it ran'). Coleridge's 'Thro' Wood and Dale the sacred river ran' sounds even closer to Dryden than to Collins, but whereas Dryden then moves to a powerful succeeding line: 'The diapason closing full in Man', Coleridge, like Collins, allows the movement to pass to an indeterminate close, the 'died away' of Collins being matched by his own 'sunk in tumult to a lifeless ocean'. (We may also note in passing, as another possible echo of Dryden, the line that ends a section in Wordsworth's 'School Exercise' (1784-5): 'Through all my fame the pleasing accents ran.')<sup>25</sup>

The subversive attractions of Collins were the effects of a sensuousness not altogether afraid of itself. Collins's delight in the oriental, similarly, found an echo in Coleridge's love of Eastern tales. Many resemblances can be traced between these exotic stories and details in Coleridge's poem—indeed, given its subject-matter, it would be surprising if they could not—the most striking occurring in the writings of an author who (though Coleridge may not have known it) was imitating Eastern tales rather than translating them. It was James Ridley's *Tales of the Genii* (the very title of which would appeal to that genius-haunted age) that seem to have engaged his imagination most fully. Ridley's book contained a convincing analogue for Kubla's dome of pleasure: the Genius of Riches produces for the delight of the merchant Abudah a dome which shines so brightly that he can hardly look in its direction—a dome of gold with pillars of precious stones, with intermediate spaces of crystal, so that the inside of the dome can be seen from every direction.

In such tales, however, the proposal of pleasure is usually ominous. When Hassan Assar, Caliph of Baghdad, found himself in a delightful wooded landscape and met a beautiful houri, they leapt to embrace one another, but as they did so were divided by a 'dismal *chasm*'. And while they stood on either side, 'viewing the horrid fissure and the dark abyss', 'wild notes of strange uncouth warlike music were heard from the bottom of the pit'. The moral of the event is the same as in Akenside's natural paradise: the caliph is told that it has happened because he had allowed himself to be over-influenced by 'the outward appearance of things'. Abudah, similarly, had been taken through a beautiful landscape, with woods of spices and perfumes breathing sweetness over the cool stream as the boats followed 'the *meanders* of the current'; but when he tried to open a chest in the centre of the temple the scene turned to darkness and destruction: the ruins of the temple falling in '*huge fragments*' while those who survived ran to and fro in despair, tearing each other to pieces.<sup>26</sup>

However attractive the siren voices of pleasure, whether in Collins's cadences or in the attractions of Eastern romance, their appearance signalled danger. The pursuit of pleasure was likely to be followed by an unhappy turn of fate. And even if Coleridge escaped the tentacles of this idea for a time during the summer of 1793, with its agreeable flirtations and poetic effusions, they re-enfolded themselves all too firmly around him just after. When he returned to Cambridge he was already beset by debts; there are also suggestions of amorous adventures with women of the town. All would be redeemed, he trusted, when he again won the medal for Greek verse which he had already gained the year before. 'Astronomy' being the set subject he made it the occasion for an effusion on genius, portraying Newton as a scientific discoverer with all the trappings of inspired genius, gazing into the spring of creative energy and inebriated by the 'holy ecstasy' that seized him.<sup>27</sup> The conclusion expressed his aspiration to join Newton in the celestial ranks of genius.

Unfortunately, however, he was not awarded the prize, and with the failure his financial embarrassments became overwhelming, so that he ran away to London. There still remained in the tradition of romance that further turn of fortune by which the victim might after all find himself transformed suddenly into a position of power. When the merchant Abudah had been overtaken by the catastrophe described earlier, he had passed into the 'dungeon of lust' from which he was able to rise only with great difficulty; yet when he finally managed to complete the long cavernous ascent he suddenly found himself on top of a mountain, acclaimed as their sultan by the voices of ten thousand.<sup>28</sup> Coleridge, likewise, was evidently hoping for a magical event which would transform his fortunes into prosperity. With the little money he had left he bought a ticket in the lottery, but the stroke of luck he hoped for eluded him. In despair, he volunteered for the army, where he stayed until rescued by his brothers.<sup>29</sup>

The disaster of late 1793 had been a chastening experience, and Coleridge was never to be carried away so fully again. Henceforward it would be his stated preference to combine feeling with thought and to choose the useful in preference to the attractive. Yet the very existence of *Kubla Khan* is a witness to the hold over his imagination which the poetry of genius and the arts of Eastern romance still retained. Among other things, this is a poem about sensual pleasure—including erotic pleasure: the delights of vision, sounds and scents in the first stanza convey suggestions such as those which are overtly expressed in the Song of Solomon, where the

bride describes herself as a wall, her breasts like towers, and promises to be a spice-laden garden to her lover.<sup>30</sup> The second stanza likewise suggests the disorders of lust (the working of grievous sexual energies, emblemized in the rough chasm and violent fountain, is made manifest in the woman wailing for her daemon-lover). The figure of genius in the last stanza, similarly, is recognizably an inspired lover, resembling the lover who in the Song of Songs comes into his garden to gather myrrh and spice, to eat honeycomb with honey and to drink wine with milk. It seems likely, as Lowes suggested, that when Coleridge read of Kubla's paradise garden in Purchas's *Pilgrimage*, he was reminded of the false paradise of Alcadine, described just before the parallel passage in Purchas's *Pilgrimes*, with its pipes that ran with 'Wine, milke, Honey, and cleere Water' and 'goodly Damosels skilfull in Songs and Instruments of Musicke and Dancing'.<sup>31</sup> With such images in the background it is hardly surprising that Coleridge should write of his mountain of inspiration first as 'Mount Amora', changing it to Milton's Amara only when the censor of his consciousness had had time to intervene. The pleasures of sensuousness, which had been tantalizing him before the disaster of 1793, had by no means lost their hold on his unconscious mind.

However, the effluxions of an unchecked libido are not sufficient to account for the poem's language, either. Other echoes inhabit the garden.

## THE LANGUAGE OF COLLABORATION

Coleridge had not been alone in finding 1793 a momentous year. While he had been enjoying the doomed pleasures of that summer and autumn Wordsworth had been enjoying different pains and pleasures, to be recalled in *Tintern Abbey*. During that summer, at a time when his sensuous response to nature was acute ('The sounding cataract haunted me like a passion') he had been beset by gloomy thoughts as he saw British ships preparing for war off the Isle of Wight. Passing across Salisbury Plain, with its Druidic remains, he had been haunted by a Hardy-like sense that the patterns of human creativity and violence must always repeat themselves, so that hopes raised by the French Revolution were bound to be illusory. He had comforted himself a little by recollection of the Druids' more benevolent activities, but it was not until he passed into the Wye Valley and saw a different kind of scenery, one which seemed to impress itself irresistibly on the human consciousness, that he had felt more reassured. Perhaps, after all, there was a hidden force in nature that was working for humanity's amelioration.<sup>32</sup>

In the autumn of 1797, the convergence between Wordsworth and Coleridge reached its closest point. For the first and only time they actually planned to write poetry together: *The Wanderings of Cain* and (when that idea failed) *The Ancient Mariner* (PW, I, p. 287). The ensuing year was marked by shared observations, enthusiastic discussions and interlinking speculations, in the course of which Wordsworth's powers became steadily more manifest. Although Coleridge's intelligence was essential to the inspiration of Wordsworth at this time, he constantly assigned to his friend the dominating place. 'The giant Wordsworth!' is a typical phrase (CL, I, p. 391).

If we accept that *Kubla Khan* is a poem about genius it becomes natural to ask whether Wordsworth's genius, affirmed so enthusiastically by Coleridge, was not also a presence in the poem. And here it is relevant to recall the distinction which appears in some of Coleridge's later works between two different forms of genius: 'commanding' genius and 'absolute' genius (BL, I, pp. 31-3). The man of commanding genius was one whose genius was directed primarily outwards: he might be the man of power who would direct the making of a great harbour, or an aqueduct that brought water to the desert, or lay out a great palace, temple or landscape garden. Such men were however at the mercy of circumstance—to quote Wordsworth, they

obeyed the only law that sense

Submits to recognize; the immediate law,  
From the clear light of circumstances, flashed  
Upon an independent Intellect. (33)

In less propitious times, therefore, they would emerge as the agents of destruction, becoming the warmakers, the mighty hunters of mankind. Men of absolute genius, by contrast, can 'rest content between thought and reality, as it were in an intermundium of which their own living spirit supplies the *substance*, and their imagination the ever-varying *form*' (*BL*, I, p. 32). Applying this formula back to *Kubla Khan*, it will be evident that it expresses well the distinction between the kind of genius displayed by Kubla Khan in the first two stanzas and that of the inspired genius in the last. It can also be seen as relevant to Wordsworth himself: a man of considerable powers who had considered joining the Girondist cause in France and so been in danger of devoting those powers to the cause of violent warfare (—and who, for that matter, had left there a woman enslaved by love for him). At the time when Coleridge came to know him well, on the other hand, he was devoting himself more and more to works of what might better be called 'absolute' genius—works in which he drew on his own inward powers in the hope of exhibiting to other human beings the nature of their own potential creativity. So it is hardly fanciful to read in the development of the poem an account of Wordsworth's own progress. We need turn only to Coleridge's reported description of Wordsworth in the following spring, when he was talking to Hazlitt about his 'matter-of-factness':

His genius was not a spirit that descended to him through the air; it sprung out of the ground like a flower, or unfolded itself from a green spray, on which the gold-finch sang. He said, however (if I remember right), that this objection must be confined to his descriptive pieces, that his philosophic poetry had a grand and comprehensive spirit in it, so that his soul seemed to inhabit the universe like a palace, and to discover truth by intuition, rather than by deduction.

(‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, *H Works*, XVII, p. 17)

We might equally recall his description of Wordsworth in a notebook some years later in October 1803:

I am sincerely glad, that he has bidden farewell to all small Poems—& is devoting himself to his great work—grandly imprisoning while it deifies his Attention & Feelings within the sacred Circle & Temple Walls of great Objects & elevated Conceptions ...

(*CN*, I, 1546)

Just as Coleridge at this time had turned away from immediate politics to study the ‘causes of causes’ so Wordsworth was looking into the principles underlying all human behaviour. He was drawn to look for an absolute truth which would, when found, be compulsively clear to all. But while he cherished the dream of writing what Coleridge hoped would be ‘the *first* and only true philosophical poem in existence’ (*CL*, IV, p. 574), a poem which would present and help to solve the riddles of human existence, he was also subject to self-doubt and the fear that his sense of inspiration might be illusory—so that when he began *The Prelude* the ‘Was it for this ... ?’ theme (his own version of ‘Could I revive within me ...’) was at first dominant.<sup>34</sup>

Coleridge's admiration for Wordsworth's strength was not new: it went back to his discovery of *Descriptive Sketches* in 1793, when he had been seized by the power of passages such as the description of the storm. Reading them, he wrote later, he was struck by a vigour which recalled the vegetable processes in which ‘gorgeous blossoms’ rise out of a ‘hard and thorny shell’:

The language was not only peculiar and strong, but at times knotty and contorted, as by its own impatient strength.

(*BL*, I, p. 77)

There is a sense, then, in which *Kubla Khan*, with its pictures of commanding genius in the first two stanzas and of absolute genius in the last, is a poem about the actualities, the vulnerabilities and the potentialities which Coleridge perceived in Wordsworth's powers. In addition, the language of the poem is often very close to that of the early writing of both poets. There is a particularly close relationship to Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches*, for example. As usual we need to be on our guard, since a young poet is likely to be working from the favourite diction of his contemporaries; even so, however, it would be hard to find an eighteenth-century poem which ran so closely to the vocabulary of *Kubla Khan*. The very opening:

Where there, below, a spot of holy ground ...

contains three key words in Coleridge's poem; the convergences continue—at least in the imagery—when the poet goes on to say that if such a spot could be found it would be in a language where, among other things, 'murmuring rivers join the song of ev'n', and where

Silence, on her wing of night, o'erbroods  
Unfathom'd dells and undiscover'd woods;  
Where rocks and groves the power of water shakes  
In cataracts, or sleeps in quiet lakes.

(ll. 9-12)

Any reader who cares to trace the parallels between individual words and phrases in *Kubla Khan* and in the writings of the two poets will be struck by the very large number of such convergences. There are points, however, where one or other poet seems to be in the ascendant. In the case of the second stanza, for instance, Wordsworth's usages provide an even closer parallel than Coleridge's. Consider his 'deep chasms troubled by roaring streams' (*Borderers*, l. 1805), 'Slant watery lights' (*Evening Walk*, l. 92), light streaming 'athwart the night' (*Guilt and Sorrow*, l. 144), 'the full circle of the enchanted steep' (*Evening Walk*, l. 350), 'While opposite, the waning moon hangs still' (*Descriptive Sketches*, l. 219). It is the constant appearance of these words in contexts of landscape, and of a landscape made numinous by a juxtaposition of beauty with fear, which makes for this constant sense of connection. It is only at the 'daemon-lover' that the relevance of Coleridge's early poetry (e.g. 'She that worked whoredom with the Daemon Power' ("Religious Musings," l. 332)) becomes decidedly more significant.

The inference which might be drawn from this is that Wordsworth's idea of genius stood in the tradition which associates it with feelings of fear and wonder aroused in a numinous landscape, and that Coleridge was aware of the fact, so that when that theme entered *Kubla Khan* it was Wordsworth's poetic language that came most readily to his mind. This effect emerges still more strikingly when we look for points of what might be 'intensive' influence—points where there is a cluster of such words. Wordsworth's 'Were there, below, a spot of holy ground' has already been mentioned.

For an equally intense influence from Coleridge's own verse we should need to turn to his recent *Osorio*, which includes a line describing the 'innumerable company' who 'in broad circle',

Girdle this round earth in a dizzy motion

(*PW*, II, p. 551)

'Girdle' was probably not in the original manuscript of *Kubla Khan*, as we have seen, but even so we can still find three direct verbal parallels—including the use of 'this ... earth' and the striking resemblances between 'dizzy motion' and 'mazy motion'. If we then look for those words in the poem which had been previously used by Coleridge, but not by Wordsworth, we find words such as 'incense', 'milk', 'mazy' and 'honeydew'—words, that is, of sensuous pleasure and suggestion. And here, we may legitimately suspect, we

are looking at the language of genius that comes more naturally to Coleridge himself from his own past.

To say this is to raise a wider issue. Human beings set to remember objects or sentences are much more likely to remember those which they have already *expressed* in some form.<sup>35</sup> In particular, they remember their own previous *constructions*. We should expect, similarly, that in a poem such as *Kubla Khan* where, as we have seen, the passive side of the artist's mind seems to have been unusually prominent, that which he had done before would provide a most ready means of expression. Whereas he would be likely to recall Wordsworth's lines in terms of their *significance*, in other words, he would at the same time be treading more widely in his own memory, sometimes producing tangential effects from past poems whether or not there was a bond of significance as well ('dizzy motion'—'mazy motion' is a good example of such a connection: strong in repetition of movement and sound, lighter in terms of actual significance). We should also expect that where parallels of diction and significance concurred there might be a very intensive effect. A good example can be found in his *Monody on the Death of Chatterton*, where Chatterton's inspiration is described in the lines:

See, as floating high in air  
Glitter the sunny Visions fair,  
His eyes dance rapture, and his bosom glows!

(*PW*, I, p. 127)

No less than seven of the strong words in these lines are found in *Kubla Khan*, and the congruity of theme goes without saying. If Wordsworth is the master of the numinous wild landscape, Coleridge's voice comes into its own with descriptions of ecstatic poetic inspiration.

Such are the general patterns that seem to emerge from an inspection of earlier usages by Wordsworth and Coleridge that are echoed in the poem. It is also profitable to turn to the various words which had not previously been used by either poet. This list, which is not long, would include such words as *pleasure-dome* (as opposed to *pleasure* and *dome* separately), *measureless* (as opposed to *measure*), *sinuous*, *greenery*, *at once and ever*, *ancestral* and *revive*. First, obviously, we look for evidence of Coleridge's innovatory skills—and we are not disappointed, since the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives no use of 'greenery' before *Kubla Khan*; the idea of reviving *within oneself* looks more sophisticated than the usages recorded there, also (though here we may be on less sure ground). The most unusual word to a modern eye, 'momently', is not in fact a new coinage, but both Coleridge and Wordsworth enjoyed using it afterwards, as we shall see.

The passage which is brought most into prominence when we look for words not previously used by either poet is the one that follows immediately after 'momently was forced':

Amid whose swift half-intermittent burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail ...

The words previously unused by Coleridge (represented here of course by *lack* of italics) make up a large and distinctive knot within the poem as a whole; and the list (apart from 'flail', which is used rather memorably in 'the *measured* echo of the distant *flail*' in *Descriptive Sketches* l. 770) is shared with Wordsworth. The other striking feature of these lines is their descriptive skill. It is as if when Coleridge moves into representation of energy he manages also to break free of poetic practice, his own and others'. We cannot forget, of course, that the image of threshing is biblical: Isaiah (40:15) had spoken of the Lord as threshing the mountains and making the hills as chaff, and his imagery had been presented as an example of the biblical sublime by Lowth, whom Coleridge read in 1796.<sup>36</sup> Yet there is also a freshness here, a vivid realization of the images being drawn into service. When Coleridge copies phrases of biblical rhetoric into his notebooks (perhaps as fuel for projected rhetoric) they sometimes look perfervid and overblown; here the phrases have been fully assimilated into verse with a life of its own.

This is the nearest we come to a passage of direct originality in the poem. Elsewhere, as we have seen, Coleridge's originality is to be found working indirectly by way of previous poetic languages—not only Wordsworth's but those of eighteenth-century poets such as Gray and Collins. If we now move still further back, to a poet who stands behind these poets, we may begin to understand more precisely the kinds of pressure from the past that are being exerted on certain particular words and phrases, reminding us of other and older languages.

## THE LANGUAGE OF LOSS

We have already suggested that the wistfulness towards Milton expressed by poets such as Gray and Collins might prompt a response less despairing than their own. They might mourn the impossibility of ever matching Milton's achievement, yet the very ecstasy of the language in which they did so could prompt a different response: that very language was perhaps waiting to be developed by a new Milton, if one should arise. And was it after all impossible to imagine a poet of equivalent strength? 'What if you should meet in the letters of any then living man, expressions concerning the young Milton ... the same as mine of Wordsworth', wrote Coleridge to Poole in 1800, 'would it not convey to you a most delicious sensation?' (*CL*, I, p. 584). Meanwhile he was cherishing his own dreams of writing an epic poem (*CL*, I, pp. 320-1).

Yet if one tried to array Milton too readily in the singing robes of genius and sensuousness the paradox threatened to come full circle, since he himself, despite his insistence ('On Education', para. 17) that true poetry was 'simple, sensuous and passionate', had imposed severe limits on sensuous indulgence. Unless he went the full course with Blake and decided that Milton himself had erred in his view of pleasure, the young man who hoped to rival him must take on himself the same burden of moral knowledge, the same belief that in every sensuous paradise there must lurk a deadly serpent.<sup>37</sup>

Coleridge always accepted that knowledge, seeing his own life as a constant series of movements between pleasure proposed and guilt supervening. The paradigm is clear enough in *The Eolian Harp*, where, as soon as he has set forth a speculative philosophy which might reconcile sensuous experience with the divine he rebukes himself (through the imagined intervention of Sarah) for such 'unhallowed thoughts' (so, incidentally, invoking the figure of the Lady in *Comus* when she unlocks her lips in 'this unhallowed air' (l. 757)). When he and Sarah enjoyed their married bliss in their Clevedon cottage later on it was with an under knowledge of admonition, a sense first signalled in his poem *Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement* by the passing Bristol 'son of Commerce' who was made to 'muse / With wiser feelings', declaring that it was 'a Blesséd Place' (*PW*, I, p. 106). The ironic reference is of course to Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Book Nine passing through Eden like one 'long in populous city pent' before the Fall and looking with muffled envy, 'stupidly good', at the happiness he sees there. For Coleridge, however, the moral points differently, towards himself and Sarah. They will be forced to take on Adam's fate and, in the interests of social responsibility, leave their paradise. The admonitory Miltonic note sounds for them, also.

In *Kubla Khan*, likewise, every phrase with an echo of *Paradise Lost* is shot through with plangency of foreknowledge. The very line with which the poem opens recalls Adam, seeing

the destined walls

Of Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Can ...

(IX, ll. 387-8)

—a foresight clouded with the double irony of Adam's knowledge that this will be a post-lapsarian paradise, doomed to decay, and the reader's that, as with the others to be catalogued, that decay has by now been realized.

So with other words in the poem that recall *Paradise Lost*. Likenesses are accompanied by telling differences. If the sacred river recalls the river that flowed through Eden, the actual description of it, progressing through caverns to a sunless sea, is in contrast with Milton's description in Book Four of his river before the Fall, when it divided, part returning to well up again in a spring near the Tree of Life. As Coleridge writes of 'sinuous rills', similarly, we are likely to be reminded that Milton's river-fountain went on to water the garden 'with many a rill'; the word 'sinuous', which had not appeared before in Coleridge's poetry or Wordsworth's, was elsewhere used by Milton to describe the worms and serpent-like creatures which for all their attractive colouring were to become pests after the Fall (IV, l. 481).

The undertone of admonition emerges more strongly in the second stanza. The word 'savage' occurs during Satan's entry into Paradise: 'Now to the ascent of that steep savage hill / Satan had journeyed on' (IV, ll. 172-3). The 'cedarn cover', similarly, recalls his return just before the Fall:

Nearer he drew, and many a walk traversed  
Of stateliest covert, cedar, pine, or palm ...

(IX, ll. 434-5)

—the word 'cover' looking forward simultaneously to Adam's cry after the Fall: 'cover me ye pines, / Ye cedars, with innumerable boughs, / Hide me, where I may never see me more' (IX, ll. 1088-90). The woman wailing for her daemon-lover suggests Eve after the Fall—particularly if we recall the rabbinical tradition, known no doubt to both Milton and Coleridge, that the tempting of Eve took the form of actual sexual temptation by Satan<sup>38</sup> (there might also be a distant echo from the temptation of Samson in Milton's drama, by Delilah, who describes herself 'Wailing thy absence in my widowed bed').<sup>39</sup>

The remainder of the stanza moves into a pattern which recalls the shape of *Paradise Lost* as a whole. The violent fountain is redolent of the vast destruction during the War in Heaven and the natural disorders after the Fall. When the river that flows from it moves with a mazy motion we recall not merely Gray's *Progress of Poetry* but Milton's river, which 'flowed with mazy error'—the strange foreboding note is sounded once again within a description of Paradise.<sup>40</sup> The ancestral voices prophesying war recall some of the grim visions of the future presented to Adam in the final books of *Paradise Lost*, while the syntactical form of the line recalls the faces that threatened from the walls of Eden as Adam and Eve departed: 'fierce faces threatening war' (XI, l. 641).

It is in the last stanza that the presence of *Paradise Lost* is most crucial, for there it intrudes with its admonitory implications on the most ecstatic statements in the poem, importing ambiguity. The most intensive echo comes, as has often been noticed, from the passage where Milton describes the later paradises which were to recall Eden, notably the one

... where Abassin kings their issue guard  
Mount Amara, though this by some supposed  
True Paradise, under the Ethiop line  
By Nilus head ...

(IV, ll. 280-3)

It is peculiarly appropriate that Coleridge's paradise should, by implication, be situated by the source of another sacred river, the Nile, in view both of the sun/moon, Isis and Osiris imagery in the poem and of the lore surrounding the troglodytes of Abyssinia (including their supposed invention of the dulcimer, a form of lyre).<sup>41</sup> Immediately before that description in Milton's poem there is another which is also appropriate:



Girt with the river Triton, where old Cham  
Whom Gentiles Ammon call and Lybian Jove,  
Hid Amalthea and her florid son  
Young Bacchus from his stepdame Rhea's eye ...

(IV, ll. 275-9)

It is not simply that the infant Bacchus, as a young divinity, was nurtured on milk and honey, but that Rhea (as Richard Gerber points out) is an alternative name for Cybele, so that the threat from the destructive earth-mother moves in the background of Milton's narrative also.<sup>42</sup> Throughout Milton's description, moreover, we are reminded that these are all false paradises: they may image Eden, but none can actually replace it. The 'symphony and song' may remind us of the 'dulcet symphonies and voices sweet' in Book One of *Paradise Lost*; if so, we are simultaneously reminded that the 'fabric huge ... Built like a temple' which was raised to their sound was none other than Pandaemonium, the meeting-place of the devils (I, ll. 710-57). And even when we see the words 'deep delight' we may recall that the nearest parallel in *Paradise Lost* is also admonitory:

But if the sense of touch whereby mankind  
Is propagated seems such dear delight  
Beyond all other, think the same vouchsafed  
To cattle and each beast ...

(VIII, ll. 579-82)

At this point a reinforcing echo is provided by that other master of the false paradise, Spenser. When Atin arrives at Acrasia's Bower of Bliss to rouse Cymochles, he finds him surrounded by 'a flock of *Damzelles*', charming him with sensuous pleasures, including 'sweet wordes, dropping like *honny dew*'. He is shocked to see him 'Thus in still waves of *deep delight* to wade' (II, v, 32.4-35.2). These warning echoes from *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queene* link with the fact that the dome is built 'in air'—not, apparently, on the solid earth.

Although the language of *Paradise Lost* is one of the clearest presences in the poem it speaks with no simple voice: it offers sounds and sights of paradise but in the act reminds, always, that Eden is not to be permanently or totally regained. That alternation between attraction and admonition, each redoubling on the other, contributes strongly to the note of plangency in Coleridge's poem.

The language of *Paradise Lost* is not the only voice of Milton in the poem, as we shall see later, but the echoes from it, including the trisyllabic Xanadu for 'Xamdu' (probably prompted unconsciously by the sound of Milton's 'Cambalu') and the Amara of the last stanza, are so strong that we do well to attend to them—and to the note that they portend. They point to the deepest division with Coleridge's own psyche and so to the hindrances he experienced as a poet when his moral consciousness was actively in play.

## THE LANGUAGE OF MEDIATION

Whenever the language of *Paradise Lost* emerges recognizably in *Kubla Khan* it introduces a tension between the aesthetic and the moral which reinforces the tension between the first two stanzas.

No-one after Milton quite succeeded in recreating that tension on a large scale: it perhaps required the impetus and momentum of an enthusiasm for the baroque if it were to be sustained for so long. Coleridge might have seemed unusually well qualified to revive the strain by his alternations between sensuous delight and deep guilt; but in fact the very extremity of their operation disabled him. The naturally welling language of his poetic imagination would regularly be turned to impotence or restraint as some act of extravagance was

followed by moral reproach, whether from the external world or from his own conscience.

In such a situation the poetry of William Cowper had an important and subtle role to play. To ‘the head of fancy of Akenside’ and ‘the heart and fancy of Bowles’ in his catalogue of critical appreciation Coleridge added ‘the “divine chit-chat” of Cowper’, his terms acknowledging the sharpness of the tension that needed to be resolved (*CL*, I, p. 279).<sup>43</sup> Cowper had succeeded in the difficult task of reconciling the religious with the warmly sociable and finding a single diction that would contain them.

In the 1790s Cowper's ability to walk such tightropes had proved valuable in another context. For young radicals he was a figure of markedly liberal views who had yet contrived to remain acceptable across the whole range of contemporary society—his secret having been to propitiate the household gods of his age by blending his warm sensibility with a firmly moral uprightness. The resulting diction provided a secure form of discourse in times of difficulty. For Coleridge, who knew the alternate states of sensuous acceptance and gnawing guilt, and who had sometimes been plunged into depths of despair not unlike those which Cowper knew, the offered mode of mediation was of unusual value, for it marked the limits within which sensuousness could be indulged by the virtuous without danger.

During 1797-8 Cowper's mediation was to be particularly valuable to Coleridge as he wrought the art of his ‘conversation poems’ to its finest pitch. His presence in the greatest of them, *Frost at Midnight*, where his writing becomes a scaffolding from which Coleridge can build a more delicate diction of his own, has been noticed by more than one critic.<sup>44</sup> The relation of Cowper's poetry to *Kubla Khan* is of a different kind: providing a safety net for Coleridge in his aspirations to the sublime. That attempt to bring together poetry and philosophy, pursued seriously on a limited scale by Akenside, more light-heartedly by Darwin, found a strong yet sober advocate in Cowper, whose imagery was not altogether removed from that in Coleridge's closing lines. ‘Philosophy’, he wrote,

In the pure fountain of eternal love Has eyes indeed ...	baptiz'd
Friends in the friends of science, and true prayer Has flow'd from lips wet with Castalian dews. Such was thy wisdom, Newton, Childlike sage!	... Piety has found
Milton, whose genius had angelic wings, And fed on manna!	... Such too thine,

(*The Task*, III, ll. 243-5; 249-52; 254-6)

(The last phrase was to be used by Hazlitt in later years to describe Coleridge, as he remembered him in 1798, at the height of his inspiration.)<sup>45</sup>

In *Charity* Cowper describes how the philosopher, studying astronomy, ‘Drinks wisdom at the milky stream of light’ (l. 319). Such lines provide secure underpinning for the more sensuous and ecstatic picture of genius in *Kubla Khan*. Elsewhere Coleridge's poem echoes large sections, rather than individual lines of Cowper's work, the reminiscences being usually not of words but of more general ideas. A good example is the account of the Sicilian earthquake in Book Two of *The Task*, a passage which may well have come to the minds of Wordsworth and Coleridge when they visited the Valley of Rocks and considered the kind of force that could have brought about such a scene. ‘Alas for Sicily!’ Cowper begins, ‘rude *fragments* now / Lie scatter'd where the shapely column stood.’ The scene is then explored as one which has displayed the power of God and of God's wrath, sounds of pastoral pleasure having given way to the noise of his punitive workings, desolation replacing what was formerly a paradisaal scene:

How does the earth receive him?—With what signs  
 Of gratulation and delight, her king?  
 Pours she not all her choicest gifts abroad,  
 Her sweetest flow'rs, her aromatic gums,  
 Disclosing paradise where'er he treads?  
 She quakes at his approach. Her hollow womb,  
 Conceiving thunders, through a thousand deeps  
 And fiery caverns roars beneath his foot.

In the whole long passage of nearly sixty lines (II, ll. 75-132), there are some exact verbal links with *Kubla Khan*: 'fragments', 'paradise', 'caverns', 'rocks', 'Immense the tumult'; but they are few and scattered. It is the transition from sensuous paradise to destructive upheaval, exhibiting the two sides of God's activity, which is closest to Coleridge's poem. This sense of threat to an ordered plan is a recurring theme in Cowper. At one point he pictures 'th'omnipotent magician' Capability Brown raising a 'palace' for his patron, changing everything in the landscape—woods, hills and valleys:

And streams, as if created for his use,  
 Pursue the track of his directing wand,  
 Sinuous or straight, now rapid and now slow,  
 Now murmuring soft, now roaring in cascades—  
 Ev'n as he bids!

(III, ll. 778-82)

Unfortunately, however, the expense of such building bankrupts the owner, and so he never enjoys what he has created. Similarly with another magical work of construction: the Russian palace of ice, the 'brittle prodigy' built by the Empress Anna at St Petersburg, to which the young Coleridge compared Erasmus Darwin's poetry:

'Twas transient in its nature, as in show  
 'Twas durable: as worthless, as it seem'd  
 Intrinsically precious; to the foot  
 Treacherous and false; it smil'd, and it was cold.

(V, ll. 173-6)

This is yet another vivid variation on the theme (which dogged Cowper even more than others in his age) that any paradisaical enterprise is likely to involve a complementary element of threat, deceit or fragility.

But while Cowper's ideas contribute firmly to the transition between the first and second stanzas of *Kubla Khan*, his verbal influence is more often mediating and reconciling. The larger diction of Coleridge's lines, with their mingling of elegance and artistry, owed something to the neatly turned cadences of Cowper's discourse; we may note further that 'spot' is a favourite word of his ('Think on the fruitful and well-watered spot' (*Expostulation*, l. 418)) and that some of the less common words and phrases, such as 'sinuous' (in relation to a stream), 'meandering', 'this earth', 'decree', and 'tumult' all occur at least twice in his work.<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, however, the influence of Cowper seems to appear most directly when Coleridge revises his poem for publication many years later. When he substitutes for 'hideous tumult' 'ceaseless tumult', he is not only softening the diction of the line but substituting for a word more common in Milton than in Cowper a word which might well recall Cowper's line 'By ceaseless action all that is subsists' (*The Task*, I, l. 367)—a line likely to have appealed to Coleridge's interest in the role of energy and the nature of Being, and following closely on a description of a thresher with his flail, sending the chaff flying (I, ll. 355-9). Similarly, when Coleridge changes 'With walls and towers were compass'd round' to 'were girdled round', the increase in elegance is reminiscent of Cowper's 'The blooming groves that girdled her around'—used again (in *Heroism*,

## I. 6) of Etna and Sicily.

Cowper's language affected Coleridge's creating consciousness in various ways. His description of the Sicilian earthquake, where a sense of the earth's ambiguous power was overlaid by that of God's vengeance, added weight to the note of admonition that had run through Milton's descriptions of Paradise; his use of sensuous imagery for inspired knowledge gave backing to Coleridge's more unrestrained enthusiasm. Such influences, however, belonged properly to the speculative activity that had preceded the making of *Kubla Khan*. The role of Cowper's diction, as recalled in the making of the poem itself, tended to be a restrained and restraining one, helping to mould the sensuous elegances of the diction and particularly evident when Coleridge came to cast a revisionary eye over what had been created in a more passive state of mind. As opposed to the 'threshold' language which is the poem's most distinctive feature, this was a language of the circumference, fostering yet limiting at the same time. Its role, though muted, was still, given Coleridge's precarious purchase on the idea of genius, a valuable one.

## THE LANGUAGE OF MAGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Although Cowper's language helped provide defensive cover for the advance from Milton's admonitory sublime to a sublime that would encompass larger areas of sensuous experience, its full value as a mediating agency emerged only when Coleridge was writing his meditative verse. There, in what are often known as the 'conversation poems', Cowper's delight in the power of human sensibility to respond to delicate phenomena in nature was extended into a full-scale exploration of the relationship between mind and nature, based on intimate sensuous observation. When Cowper praised inspired knowledge, by contrast, the moral reservations concerning human limitation which underlay his imagery of threatened paradise necessarily cast their shadow across that larger aim also. By the 1790s, moreover, the growth of specialized knowledges was making the creation of an all-embracing scientific theory still more difficult, reinforcing the sense that any projected totality of knowledge might prove to be no more than a doomed construction.

The precariousness of the framework for such a unified view as provided by philosophies such as those of Locke and Newton had been further demonstrated in Coleridge's time when the attempt of the French *philosophes* to build a new order on the basis of nature interpreted by reason had turned to destruction, defeated by flaws in human nature itself. There was, nevertheless, an older tradition of unified knowledge which had not been altogether discredited by recent events. During the Renaissance the Pythagorean philosophy, which linked the order of nature to that of music, had been an inspiration to poets and thinkers alike. This philosophy, unlike that which had been recently fashionable, did not rely upon an optimistic view of general human nature; on the contrary, it assumed that a harmonized knowledge would be reached only by a few, and under special conditions.

By the 1790s the revival of interest in various forms of Platonism meant that a young man such as Coleridge would be particularly alert to the potency of that tradition, which had been at its height in the late sixteenth century and still active in the early seventeenth, attracting, among others, the young Milton. And so it is apposite to recognize that despite the many echoes of *Paradise Lost* in *Kubla Khan*, the presence of Milton himself there is not limited to that of his greatest poem. When the echoes are from a word which has strong roots in Milton's early career, in fact, the connotations are often different, belonging rather to the magical world of art. The word 'haunt', for example, always a word with good overtones in Milton's writing, is used memorably in *L'Allegro*:

Such sights as youthful poets dream  
On summer eves by haunted stream.

(ll. 129-30)

When we read that the shadow of the dome of pleasure ‘floated midway on the wave’, similarly, we might, if we were thinking only of *Paradise Lost*, recall Satan, ‘With head uplift above the *wave*’ while his other parts ‘lay *floating* many a rood’; but such echoes fade as soon as we reach back into the early poetry and remember the time of peace that greets the birth of Christ, ‘While Birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed *wave*’, or Sabrina, sitting ‘under the glassy cool translucent *wave*’.<sup>47</sup>

An echo of this kind, where the use of ‘wave’ completed a held moment of formalized enchantment, recalls, in turn, other poets who stand behind the early Milton. We have already noted two apparent echoes from Spenser, and it is a little surprising that his possible presence in *Kubla Khan* has been so little attended to in view of the overt ‘Elizabethanism’ of the sentence about Xanadu which Coleridge records as having been his starting-point:

... wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure ...

The word ‘stately’, which Purchas then used to describe Kubla's palace, is a favourite word of Spenser's, as we discover early in *The Faerie Queene*:

A stately Pallace built of squared bricke,

Which cunningly was without mortar laid,  
Whose walls were high, but nothing strong nor thick,  
And golden foile all over them displaid,  
That purest skye with brightnesse they dismaid  
High lifted up were many loftie towres ...

(I, iv, 4)

An enchanting sight, one might think, but as Spenser's epigraph has already revealed, this is the House of Pride—a place therefore of foreboding, not of permanent pleasure. Yet such buildings remain, like the Bower of Bliss, images of true beauty: we need think only of Spenser's lines to Sir Walter Raleigh, ‘In whose high thoughts Pleasure hath built her bowre’—the last phrase of which he uses elsewhere to describe both true love and the good life.<sup>48</sup>

There are a number of words which, though figuring in sources examined so far, stand out in Spenser with particular clarity. In the ‘Visions of Bellay’, for example, we find the lines:

... Which, like incense of precious Cedar tree  
With balmie odours fill'd th'ayre farre and nie

(XI, ll. 3-4)

—a collocation which suggests that the incense-bearing trees and the cedarn covers were one and the same in Coleridge's imagination. ‘Beware’ is a particularly Spenserian word, as are ‘savage’ and ‘haunt’. To Spenser, too, we turn for several uses of the phrase ‘*compassed round*’—for example,

That turrets frame most admirable was  
Like highest heaven compassed around. (49)

(This is a good example of a Spenserean brightness darkened by a Miltonic overtone, for Milton's two uses of the phrase are ‘With terrors and with clamours compassed round’ and ‘In darkness, and with dangers compassed round’ (of Satan and himself respectively).)<sup>50</sup> As Richard Gerber points out, Spenser's most significant use for our purposes comes in the description of the mural crown of the Thames in *The Faerie Queene*:

In which were many towres and castels set  
That it encompass round as with a golden fret.  
Like as the mother of the Gods, they say, ...  
Old Cybele, arrayd with pompous pryde ...

(IV, xi, ll. 27-8)

Here the walls and towers by the river turn into the crown of Cybele's pride, forging another possible link in the imagery of ambiguous earth-powers. It should also be noted, however, that whereas the links with *Paradise Lost* can often be established within the implications of particular phrases or place-names, Spenser's presence is often more diffusive in effect. Consider, for example, the line

So did the Gods by heavenly doome decree ...

(*The Ruines of Rome*, VI, l. 11)

The fascination of this echo is that if accepted it imports into the second line the implication that when Kubla Khan was decreeing his pleasure-dome he was also decreeing his pleasure-doom. Yet it is working through associations primarily of sound rather than of sense. And as one investigates such possible echoes from Spenser one is often unusually aware of a whole poetic context that is there giving life to the word or words. Coleridge himself wrote of *The Faerie Queene*,

It is in the domains neither of history or geography; it is ignorant of all artificial boundary, all material obstacles; it is truly in land of Faery, that is, of mental space. The poet has placed you in a dream, a charmed sleep, and you neither wish nor have the power, to inquire where you are, or how you got there.

(*Misc C*, p. 36)

A similar atmosphere of enchantment (working also through the general dreamwork of the poem) seems to cling to many of the words in *Kubla Khan* which have Spenserian parallels; it comes particularly to the fore in Coleridge's third stanza, where the 'miracle' that is described reconciles heat and cold, a relationship the paradoxical nature of which had fascinated the Elizabethans. Shakespeare was fond of it: '... hot ice and wondrous strange snow. / How shall we find the concord of this discord?'; 'To bathe in fiery floods or to reside / In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice'; 'O, who can hold a fire in his hand / By thinking on the frosty Caucasus? ... Or wallow naked in December snow / By thinking on fantastic summer's heat?'; 'There may as well be amity and life / 'Tween snow and fire, as treason and my love'.<sup>51</sup> Between these opposites human sensation sometimes recognizes strange points of concord: when Coleridge drew up a list of illustrations for his favourite saying 'Extremes meet', the first was a quotation from *Paradise Lost*: 'The parching Air / Burns froze, and Cold performs the Effect of Fire.'<sup>52</sup> This, however, was torturing, a foretaste of the state where the damned are constantly hurried back and forth to burn in 'beds of raging fire' and 'starve in ice' by turns (II, ll. 598-603). Coleridge's own search was for points of positive correspondence between such extremes, allowing them to be reconciled into a more beneficent unity. 'Socinianism moonlight—Methodism a Stove / O for some sun to unite heat & light' (CN, I, 1233). It is an equivalent miracle that is envisaged in the third stanza of *Kubla Khan*.

There is also an erotic strain here, of course: since the most common correlatives of fire and ice in Elizabethan times were lust and chastity. Here, too, if Coleridge looked for the point of reconciliation and harmony between apparent opposites, he would be taken further into the heart of Renaissance poetry. The phrase 'of rare device' leads on to *The Faerie Queene*, which contains lines such as 'So fashioned a Porch with rare device' (of the Bower of Bliss), 'A work of rare device and wondrous wit' or 'could be fram'd by workmans rare device'.<sup>53</sup> Yet here again the most relevant parallel turns out to be one which has the phrase in a less

exact form:

That fire, which all things melts, should harden yse;  
And yse, which is congeal'd with senselesse cold,  
Should kindle fyre by wonderfull devyse!  
                                Such is the powre of love in gentle mind,  
                                That it can alter all the course of kynd.

(*Amoretti*, xxx)

Love, for the Elizabethans, was the key which could work such miracles of transformation, and so it remained for Coleridge. His ideal of a love which could reconcile the extremes of heat and ice into a temperate sensuousness had already been well figured in poems such as Milton's early *Arcades*, where the nymphs and swains approaching the Countess, 'Sitting like a goddess bright, / In the centre of her light', comment:

Might she the wise Latona be  
Or the towered Cybele,  
Mother of a hundred gods;  
Juno dare not give her odds ...

(ll. 20-3)

The Apollonian and the Dionysiac emerge here figured respectively as Latona (mother of Apollo and Diana), or Cybele, multi-breasted earth-mother: they are seen as reconciled in Milton's Countess just as they are to be in Coleridge's 'Abyssinian maid'. In Milton's poem the 'Genius of the Wood' goes on to address the swains themselves:

Of famous Arcady ye are, and sprung  
Of that renowned flood, so often sung,  
Divine Alpheus, who by secret sluice,  
Stole under seas to meet his Arethuse ...

(ll. 28-31)

Creative dialectic is again in play, this time between Alpheus and Arethusa, and continues as the Genius describes his own beneficent work in nature, fostering and protecting growing things everywhere while at night he can relax and attend to the 'celestial sirens' harmony':

Such sweet compulsion doth in music lie  
To lull the daughters of Necessity,  
And keep unsteady Nature to her law,  
And the low world in measured motion draw  
After the heavenly tune, which none can hear  
Of human mould with gross unpurged ear ...

(ll. 68-73)

We are close here to the inner music that Coleridge wishes to recapture in his last stanza, a music that would inspire the creative spirit to feats of miraculous construction, embodying reconciliation of warring elements in the manner that Sir John Davies pictured when he described Love as the intervening creator in *Orchestra*:

Then did he rarefy the element,  
                                And in the centre of the ring appear,  
The beams that from his forehead spreading went,  
                                Begot an horror, and religious fear

In all the souls that round about him were;  
   Which in their ears attentiveness procures,  
   While he, with such like sounds their minds  
 allures. (54)

Davies, also, brings us close to the inner significance of Coleridge's aspiration, which is to achieve the poetry that reconciles warring elements. The ultimate calling of the poet is to become (in Coleridge's own words) one of the 'Gods of Love who tame the Chaos' (*CN*, II, 2355). Small wonder then, that the last lines have led critics to recall an ancient description of poets who, like 'the priests of Cybele', 'perform not their Dances, while they have the free Use of their Understandings' but who, 'possessed by some Divine Power, are like the Priestesses of Bacchus, who, full of the God, no longer draw Water, but *Honey* and *Milk* out of the Springs and Fountains ...'. For these are the poets as envisaged in the *Ion*.<sup>55</sup> Behind Spenser and Sir John Davies stands Plato, chief ancient guarantor of the love-lore that we earlier traced out of the poem's mythical symbolism. By way of the Platonic tradition, as revived among the Elizabethans, that idea of a reconciling yet fearful love has lived on into the traditions behind Coleridge's last stanza, where the Elizabethan music that had returned to haunt English Romantic poetry, and the visionary symbolism which he had developed from many mythological sources, find themselves for a moment magically at one.

## AFTER-LANGUAGES

A reader who has accepted the course of the discussion so far and attended to the various languages proposed may by now feel glutted by the richness of the meanings that have emerged. This is likely to be a temporary effect, however. It remains perfectly possible to revert to a reading that treats the poem as a smaller, self-contained artefact, with images and words working on each other more directly. At this level, the results of an investigation such as has been carried out here are simply to help establish a remarkably high degree of common resolution in the presented images—certainly in the first two stanzas, where the element of dialectic between natural creativeness and natural destructiveness is reinforced in all the sources we have examined. The images of the last stanza, equally, are consistently those of a more absolute paradise—though somewhere behind the triumphant conclusiveness of the final cadences lurk intimations of false paradises, still warning the poet that to attempt such absolute creation within the limitations of human life may after all be folly. Just how the elements in that last stanza are weighed will vary from reader to reader. The powerful rhythm assists the sense of triumph, yet to those who attend more delicately to details of language there may seem to be an accompanying distancing and diminishing effect—almost as if the whole scene were about to disappear. In the very depths of the language, I have argued, there lies an irresolvable ambiguity between the language of loss in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the language of surviving possibility in the Elizabethans and the young Milton. Coleridge is torn both ways and his language reflects the fact.

It would be a pity to rest in a 'simple' reading of the poem, therefore, since *Kubla Khan* provides a many-faceted example of the 'over-determination' that Freud traced in much dream-work. It is only by degrees that we detect within its apparently simple diction the various voices that are contending together, but as we do so new perspectives of meaning open. The preceding discussion has relied on the assumption that Coleridge was not only a voracious reader but unusually tenacious in remembering passages that impressed him in his favourite authors, and that the peculiar conditions under which *Kubla Khan* was composed brought some of those impressed words and images into an unusual concentration and complexity of patterning. I have spoken of successive 'layers' of language but to do so would be misleading if it suggested that each layer was of the same kind. Although held together in a single linear word-continuum, the different languages of *Kubla Khan* sometimes operate in quite different modes. The poem which contains them cannot, therefore, be reduced to a final fixity, but will constantly be leading the mind in new directions. Among other things it reminds the reader that intense study of a poetic structure can bring one, at one extreme, to the point where it resolves itself into 'music' or, at another, to that where it passes into an intermelting array of visual images. Coleridge's query whether 'that ... can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as



things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort' (in the most convincing part of his later account (*PW*, I, p. 296)) indicates something of what is at issue. There remains the question of significance, which dances in and out, back and forth, freeing the reader to range between seeing the poem as an attempt at total comprehension of human experience, as a personal document, or, for that matter, as a poem about itself.

The language that mediates most readily between the surface and the hidden layers is that of genius and sensuousness. This was the new way of writing that Coleridge had been most drawn to in the intervening years, and it here emerges into a mode that for those who heard the poem for the first time was startlingly original. While it foreshadows future developments in the Romantic poetry of feeling, as in Byron and Keats, it also at the time of composition formed part of a new departure in Coleridge's poetry which we associate more generally with his poems of the supernatural. I have assumed from the outset that the composition of the poem took place when Coleridge originally said it did, late in 1797. If it was later, Coleridge's creative breakthrough came with *The Ancient Mariner*, conceived in November of that year, and *Kubla Khan* is to be read as one of the results of that breakthrough. On the present evidence, however, it is better to assume that the breakthrough came during the unusual state of semi-conscious composition described in his 1816 preface, and that the precipitation of his speculative themes in the patterning of *Kubla Khan* assisted the gestation of the still more riddling *Ancient Mariner*. In that poem, the themes we have been examining appear, but in a different ordering. The note of fear which was struck from time to time in *Kubla Khan*, to be quelled in the final triumphant cadences, dominates much of the longer poem, as Coleridge explores the paradox that awareness of the esoteric harmony underlying all things might be granted to an ordinary person only under unusual conditions of fear and terror. In this poem visionary knowledge, far from inducing a state of ecstasy, is intermingled with the taking on of guilt. It becomes a cross between curse and blessing.<sup>56</sup>

Another good reason for believing that *Kubla Khan* came first is that by late 1797 Coleridge seems, at least for the time being, to have laid the ghost of Miltonic language in the form in which it had dogged his early poetry. Milton has little part to play in *The Ancient Mariner* (which recalls rather the poetry of Spenser and Sir John Davies)<sup>57</sup> while in *Christabel* the Miltonic echo that sounds momentarily with 'The gate that was ironed within and without, / Where an army in battle array had marched out' suggests that if the castle is Milton's Hell it is simply in its form as a 'world of death'.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile some of the words and phrases in *Kubla Khan* continued to enjoy their transformed life in Coleridge's subsequent poetry. In some cases the effect is slight. 'Down to', which entered his poetry for the first time in 'down to a sunless sea', recurs in *The Ancient Mariner* in the Hermit's wood which 'slopes down to the sea', the 'honey-dew' in the voice 'as soft as honey-dew'. Here it is as much as anything a similarity of tone that is being carried over. We may also notice, however, that some of the most vigorous words and images in the poem echo words in the energetic middle section: 'burst', in 'We were the first / That ever burst'; 'flung' in 'It flung the blood into my head'; and the 'bound' of 'rebounded' in 'She made a sudden bound'. The 'chaffy grain' may be echoed very specifically in the 'Like chaff we drove along' of the 1798 version—though here we are aware of the common matrix of speculation that lies behind both poems. The relationship between the flashing eye of the genius in *Kubla Khan* and the 'glittering eye' of the Mariner, for example, may be a conscious one, marking the difference between inspiration in its active and passive forms. So much is suggested by the previous glittering eye of the baby in 'The Nightingale'.

Two verbal formulations in the poem seem to have pleased Coleridge particularly. 'Momently' was used again a year later in a letter to his wife describing his voyage to Germany ('a beautiful white cloud of foam at momently intervals roars & rushes by the side of the Vessel') and reemerged during the winter of 1799-1800 (*CL*, I, p. 416).<sup>59</sup> Similarly with the 'fast thick pants' of the earth's breathing. Coleridge's nearest approach to the phrase in his previous poetry had been his 'thick and struggling breath' in the 'Ode to the Departing Year', but in 'The Three Graves' the new form occurs more closely: 'But soon they heard his hard quick pants.' A few months later the form has been transmuted into a phrase to describe the nightingale 'That crowds, and

hurries, and precipitates / With fast thick warble his delicious notes'. After that the use disperses itself into the language of 'And pleasures flow in so thick and fast' in the conclusion to Part II of *Christabel*.<sup>60</sup> The words associated with music and song also enjoy a vivid afterlife: the Hermit 'singeth loud his goodly hymns' while the Pilot's boy laughs 'loud and long'; the Bard in *Christabel* sets out to exorcise the evil spirit 'with music loud', 'with music strong and saintly song'.

For some years the poem enjoyed a limited subterranean life in Coleridge's circle. The Crewe manuscript was apparently sent to Southey, and may have influenced his 'Oriental' writing.<sup>61</sup> The first major reaction in print came from Mary ('Perdita') Robinson, who had once composed a poem in circumstances similar to those described by Coleridge<sup>62</sup> and who, in her *Lines to S. T. Coleridge Esq.* (written about the end of 1799) wrote,

Now by the source, which lab'ring heaves  
                     The mystic fountain, bubbling, panting,  
 While gossamer its net-work weaves,  
                     Adown the blue lawn, slanting!  
 I'll mark thy 'sunny dome,' and view  
 Thy 'caves of ice,' thy fields of dew! (63)

In the same way Collier was to record in his diary for 1811 Coleridge's recitation of 'some lines he had written many years ago upon the building of a Dream-palace by Kubla-Khan' (*Sh C*, II, p. 47). Mary Robinson's reference to the 'mystic fountain' suggests that Coleridge might have expounded the meaning of the poem to her, but if so he was to give up the practice. His relationship with Sara Hutchinson failed to fulfil the hopes created by his intense affection for her, and this must have sapped his faith in love's paradisaical transforming power. In such circumstances the absolute paradise projected in his last stanza turned back into the vulnerable paradise of his first, and the familiar dialectic between sensuous indulgence and guilt reasserted itself. It is not surprising, then, that his attitude to the poem itself was defensive. By the time he wrote his preface in 1816 he was offering it as a 'psychological curiosity'—leaving only the subtitle, *A Vision in a Dream*, to tease an attentive reader with other possibilities.

The most tantalizing silence on the subject of the poem's meaning is that of Wordsworth, who was close enough to Coleridge in 1797 to have known something of the speculations involved, but who is not known to have even mentioned the poem before 1830, when he discussed it with some undergraduates at Cambridge.<sup>64</sup> He told them that he thought it 'might very possibly have been composed between sleeping and waking, or as he expressed it, in a morning sleep; he said some of his own best thoughts had come to him in that way'. His view is in line with Coleridge's early statement that it was produced in 'a sort of Reverie'; but the matter does not end there, since there are signs in his own poetry and prose that he had not only read the poem intently but was aware of its larger meanings. Elisabeth Schneider has drawn attention to his eloquent journal letter to Coleridge of late December 1799, describing their visit to Hardraw Force, where they found themselves in an ice-festooned cavern, while the stream 'shot from between the rows of icicles in irregular fits of strength and with a body of water that *momently* varied'. He commented later, 'In the luxury of our imaginations we could not help feeding on the pleasure which in the heat of a July noon this cavern would spread through a frame exquisitely sensible.'<sup>65</sup> On the same journey the ruins by a well and the tale told by a peasant gave him the inspiration for his poem 'Hartleap Well', in which he recorded how a knight, impressed by the leap of a hart which he had been hunting, had commemorated its feat by raising a 'pleasure-house' at the spot, the ruins of which are now all that survive. This mute comment by nature on his presumption is reinforced by the fate of his mansion, 'The finest palace of a hundred realms' of which nothing whatever remains (*WPW*, II, pp. 249-54). Just as *Peter Bell* may be read as Wordsworth's version of *The Ancient Mariner*, so this poem, with its vaunting scheme of pleasure succeeded by an avenging desolation ('More doleful place did never eye survey') seems to be Wordsworth's own version of Coleridge's first two stanzas. Elsewhere the imagery of the opening is echoed in his description of

Gehol's matchless gardens, in a clime

Chosen from widest empire, for delight  
 Of the Tartarian dynasty composed  
 Beyond that mighty wall, not fabulous  
 (China's stupendous mound!) by patient skill  
 Of myriads, and boon Nature's lavish help:  
 Scene linked to scene, and ever-growing change,  
 Soft, grand, or gay, with palaces and domes  
 Of pleasure spangled over ...

(1805, VIII, ll. 123-31)

The description continues through many lines, down to 'And all the landscape endlessly enriched / With waters running, falling, or asleep', before Wordsworth turns back to his own 'true' paradise: 'But lovelier far than this the paradise / Where I was reared ...'. Equally telling, in view of the bodily language that we have traced in the poem, is the reflection, earlier in *The Prelude*,

Caverns there were within my mind which sun  
 Could never penetrate ...

(1805, III, ll. 246-7)

I have already suggested that the imagery of genius in the poem may have been connected by Coleridge with his sense of Wordsworth's powers, and there is some evidence that the point was not lost on Wordsworth himself. Although he normally took a humble view of himself his language sometimes suggests something more sublime, as when he describes the beatitude that hides the soul in its power,

like the mighty flood of Nile

Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds  
 To fertilize the whole Egyptian plain.

(1850, VI, ll. 614-16)

and describes Como as 'a darling bosomed up / In *Abyssinian* privacy'. There is, equally, a touch of the Abyssinian maid in one of his best-known figures, the Solitary Reaper, whose song has such a powerfully vivifying effect in the heart of the hearer; while visionary creation such as that at the end of the poem is reflected in 'The Power of Sound':

The gift to king Amphion  
 That walled a city with its melody  
 Was for belief no dream ...

(ll. 129-31; *WPW*, II, p. 327)

The most telling reference, however, comes in *The Prelude* when Wordsworth (in lines that recall Cowper's 'lips wet with Castalian dews') thinks of Coleridge in Sicily and remembers him telling how 'bees with honey fed / Divine Comates':

How with their honey from the fields they came  
 And fed him there, alive, from month to month,  
 Because the goatherd, blessèd man, had lips  
 Wet with the Muse's nectar.

(1805, X, ll. 1023-6)

A few lines later Wordsworth pictures Coleridge searching for the Arethusa fountain and, when he finds one that might have been the original, lingering 'as a gladsome votary'. Such references suggest some intimacy with the 'subtle speculations' and 'toils abstruse / Among ... Platonic forms / Of wild ideal pageantry' (as Wordsworth called them elsewhere in *The Prelude* (1805, VI, ll. 308-10)) which Coleridge was fond of exploring and which had helped to shape his poem.

Coleridge meanwhile seems to have remained unsure what to do with his work. It was not until Byron heard him recite the lines and responded enthusiastically that he was encouraged to publish them as they stood. (Byron, who can be said to have exploited the vein of genius and sensibility more successfully than anyone else of his generation, himself used the line 'And woman wailing for her demon-lover' as the epigraph for *Heaven and Earth*.)

Mrs Coleridge was driven almost to despair by news of the forthcoming publication ('Oh! when will he ever give his friends anything but pain?'),<sup>66</sup> while Lamb was cautious about its likely reception, describing it as 'a vision'—'... which said vision he repeats so enchantingly that it irradiates & brings Heaven & Elysian bowers into my parlour while he sings or says it, but there is an observation Never tell thy dreams, and I am almost afraid that Kubla Khan is an owl that wont bear day light. I fear lest it shall be discovered by the lantern of typography & clear reducing to letters, no better than nonsense, or no sense' (*LL(M)*, III, p. 215). In the event the immediate reception was tepid. Hazlitt, taking his cue from Lamb, perhaps, commented that the lines showed how Coleridge could 'write better *nonsense* verses than any man in England', *Kubla Khan* being 'not a poem, but a musical composition'.<sup>67</sup> The most favourable comment, from an anonymous writer in the *Anti-Jacobin*,<sup>68</sup> was that, like 'The Pains of Sleep', the poem was 'not wholly discreditable to the author's talents'.

Soon, however, the tide began to turn. By 1821 Leigh Hunt was describing the poem as 'a voice and a vision, an everlasting tune in our mouths, a dream fit for Cambuscan and all his poets ... a piece of the invisible world made visible by a sun at midnight and sliding before our eyes'.<sup>69</sup> John Bowring, similarly, commented that he who had ever heard it read well 'without exquisite enjoyment at that time, and a haunting recollection at intervals ever after' certainly had 'no music in his soul'.<sup>70</sup>

With such comments the terms for nineteenth-century appreciation of the poem were set in place, falling in with a growing fashion for 'musical' poetry. It is possible that one or two of Coleridge's contemporaries read the poem symbolically: the 'Indian maid' of Keats's *Endymion*, conceived in the year following its publication, may have owed something to Coleridge's 'Abyssinian maid', for example. But apart from a single intriguing use of 'Mount Abora' in Coventry Patmore's poetry<sup>71</sup> there is little further hint of a search for meaning. Instead the poem was seized upon gratefully as an example of pure music in poetry.

There is of course good reason for this in the poem itself. When we ask where the originality lies in *Kubla Khan* as a whole, we are likely to conclude that it is in the general sense of enchantment that is embodied particularly in the rhythms and cadences. But to limit the poem's effects in this way is not only to accede to those who feel that such poetry is the purest and best, but to miss the degree to which Coleridge's achievement in this mode is like an iridescent veil, lightly screening the reader from conflicts that lie hidden in the very languages that are being used to such effect. Those conflicts themselves are the result of Coleridge's aspirations: aspirations towards psychic integration in the individual and harmonizing social order in the community. In these very quests, also, there is implicit the desire for a version of human knowledge which will answer to the best potentialities of humankind. Meanwhile, however, the languages of the poem are betraying a continual clash between that of Spenser, the Elizabethans and the early Milton at their most lyrical, which suggests that the aspiration for a total harmonizing and paradisaic knowledge is attainable, and that of the later Milton, which is built in the sad assurance that for human beings the knowledge of such paradise must always be a knowledge of loss.

Much of Coleridge's later prose work represented a series of continuing attempts to find harmonizing solutions to such problems, which he encountered in himself and in the society about him. Yet as his notebooks and letters record, those aspirations were always shot through with a darker awareness of his own failures of will, suggesting that the moral capabilities of human beings were not powerful enough to sustain any such state, even if it could be temporarily attained. The struggle between the two recognitions seems sometimes to have been subtle and intense enough to thwart the actual production of poetry: to glimpse its more creative existence by way of the languages that run together beneath the gothic sensuousness of *Kubla Khan* is to catch his mind, for once, in its fullest ferment. It may also suggest something important about the problems that have been inherent in making serious poetry during the last two hundred years.

## Notes

1. First described in *TLS* [*Times Literary Supplement*] (2 Aug 1934), p. 541 and later reproduced photographically in articles by John Shelton, *Review of English Literature* VII (1966), pp. 32-42, and T. C. Skeat *British Museum Quarterly* XXVI (1962-3), pp. 77-83.
2. See my essay 'Poems of the Supernatural', in *S. T. Coleridge*, ed. R. L. Brett, 'Writers and their Background' series (1971), pp. 54-60. For my retention of the four stanza division of *Kubla Khan* used by Coleridge in all editions appearing during his lifetime, see my note in the 1970 reprint of *Coleridge the Visionary*, p. 10.
3. See 'Poems of the Supernatural', p. 60, and D. H. Karrfalt, 'Another Note on "Kubla Khan" and Coleridge's retirement to Ash Farm,' *N&Q* CCXI (May 1966), pp. 171-2.
4. See Joan Cooper, *Culbone: A Spiritual History* (Culbone, 1977), pp. 27-36.
5. See e.g. Jacob Bryant, *A New System of an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774-6), and the *Mythological, Etymological and Historical Dictionary* derived from it by William Holwell (1793).
6. Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1617), p. 472.
7. See Berkeley's *Siris*, sect. 187, quoted in *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 119, 218.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 216-22.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 251-5; 262.
11. See passages (including Isaiah 7: 15-4) quoted *ibid.*, pp. 265-6.
12. Richard Gerber, 'Keys to "Kubla Khan"', *English Studies* XLIV (1963), pp. 1-21. Since this appeared, Coleridge's familiarity with Cybele has been confirmed by publication of a description in 1805 of rocks, 'once or twice with a Tower like the Head of Cybele' (*CN* II, 2690), and his 1818 reflection that 'in the elder world the Infinite was hidden in the Finite—Every Stream had its Naiad—the Earth its Cybele, the Ocean its Neptune' (*CN*, III, 4378, f.3v).
13. Some typical examples are by R. F. Fleissner, who draws attention to the river meandering for several miles to the sea in *Tom Jones* (*N&Q* CCV (1960), pp. 103-5); S. C. Harrex, who notices the 'dome where Pleasure holds her midnight reign' in Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* (*N&Q* CCXI (1966), pp. 172-3), and Michael Grosvenor Myer, who notes versions of the ballad *The Daemon Lover*—especially Scott's in 1812 (*N&Q* CCXXVIII (1983), p. 219).
14. See my article 'Influence and Independence in Blake' in *Interpreting Blake*, ed. M. Phillips (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 196-261.
15. See letter to Poole, Oct 1797, *CL*, I, p. 347, letter of 1815, *CL*, IV, p. 606, and my *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (1977), pp. 23-32.
16. *BL*, [I, pp. 19-20—where, however, Coleridge dates the paper a year earlier.
17. The echoes of Erasmus Darwin have been noticed by Lowes in *The Road to Xanadu*, pp. 18f, 35f, 94-9, 189f, 464-5, 473, 495; one or two more have been noted by Norman Fruman, *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel*, pp. 243 and 253-4. For *Zoönomia* see my *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence*, pp. 50-7, 74-7.
18. Cf. *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1757), I, ll. 98-102.
19. *The Pleasures of Imagination*, II, ll. 273-6, 281-8, 292-5, 660-2 (and 175-771 generally).

20. *PW*, I, pp. 45-6 and n. See W. Braekman, 'The Influence of William Collins on Poems Written by Coleridge in 1793', *Revue des Langues Vivantes* (1965), pp. 228-39.
21. John Ower, 'Another Analogue of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"', *N&Q*, CCXII, p. 294.
22. 'Ode on the Poetical Character', ll. 34-40.
23. *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 258-9.
24. 'The Passions', ll. 62-8 quoted Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*, pp. 399-400. Lowes also mentions Coleridge's project for editing Gray and Collins (see *CN*, I, 161 (2) and 174 (15)).
25. Dryden, 'Song for St. Cecilia's Day', l. 14; *WPW*, I, p. 259.
26. James Ridley, *Tales of the Genii*, 1766, I, pp. 51-2, 135-6, 77. Cf. my essay 'Poems of the Supernatural', pp. 65-6.
27. A translation of this by Southey is reproduced in my *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 297-300.
28. *Tales of the Genii*, I, p. 81.
29. See, e.g., Lawrence Hanson, *Life of Coleridge: The Early Years* (1938), pp. 34-40.
30. Song of Solomon 4: 12-15, 16; 8: 10, quoted in *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 270-1.
31. S. Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes* (Glasgow, 1905-7), XI, pp. 208-9. Quoted Lowes, pp. 361-2.
32. For further accounts, with references, see my *Wordsworth in Time* (1979), pp. 43-6, and *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* (1978), pp. 26-36.
33. See Rivers's Speech in *The Borderers*, ll. 1493-6, *PW*, I, p. 187, partly used again *Prelude* (1805), X, ll. 826-9.
34. *Oxford 'Prelude'*, p. 633. See J. Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 36-8 and nn.
35. For detailed experiments in this field see F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experiential and Social Psychology* (Cambridge, 1932).
36. R. Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*, tr. G. Gregory (1787), I, pp. 148-9. Coleridge borrowed the original Latin edition of 1753 from Bristol Library from 16 to 22 Sept. 1796. *Bristol LB*, p. 123.
37. 'I saw Milton in imagination and ... he wished me to show the falsehood of his doctrine that the pleasures of sex arose from the Fall.' E. J. Morley, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers* (1938), I, p. 330. See also my discussion in *Blake's Humanism* (Manchester, 1968), pp. 31-2.
38. See J. M. Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 48-50.
39. Line 806. A more likely reference is to the wailing for Thammuz: see *Paradise Lost*, I, ll. 446-57.
40. *Paradise Lost*, IV, l. 239. It is also reinforced when Satan resolves to fold himself in the 'mazy folds' of the serpent; *ibid.*, IX, ll. 161-2. Milton's use of 'mazy' in Book Four was no doubt responsible for the extraordinary popularity of the word in eighteenth-century verse.
41. See *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 63, 208, 241, 252f, 342.
42. 'Keys to "Kubla Khan"', pp. 16-17.
43. To Hazlitt in 1798 he 'spoke of Cowper as the best modern poet': 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', *H Works*, XVII, p. 120.
44. See, e.g., Humphry House, *Coleridge* (1953), pp. 78-9; N. Fruman, *Coleridge the Damaged Archangel* (1971), pp. 305-9.
45. 'On the living Poets', *H Works*, V, pp. 165-8.
46. *The Task*, I, l. 165; III, l. 778; 'Anti-Thelyphthora', l. 11; *The Task*, III, l. 203; 'Alexander Selkirk', l. 28, 'Hope', l. 749; 'Conversation', l. 467, 'Epistle to Lady Austen', I, l. 60 (also 'decreed'); 'Mutual Forbearance', l. 48, *The Task*, IV, 100 (in both cases the word 'war' comes later in the line).
47. *Paradise Lost*, I, ll. 192-6; 'Morning of Christ's Nativity', l. 68, 'Comus', l. 861.
48. Dedicatory Sonnet to *Faerie Queene*, VIII, 6; cf. *Amoretti* LXV, 14, 'Virgil's Gnat', l. 135.
49. *Faerie Queene*, II, ix, 45, ll. 1-2. In the Bible the form 'compassed about' is more normally used.
50. *Paradise Lost*, II, l. 862; VII, l. 27.
51. *Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, i, ll. 59-60; *Measure for Measure*, III, i, l. 123; *Richard II*, I, iii, ll. 296-9; *Merchant of Venice*, III, ii, l. 31.
52. *CN*, I, 1725, citing *Paradise Lost*, II, ll. 594-5.

53. *Faerie Queene*, II, xii, 54.1, III, i. 34-6, V, ix, 27-8. (Cf. also V, v, 12.3: 'A miracle of nature's goodly praise'.)
54. Sir John Davies, *Poetical Works* (1733), p. 248.
55. *Ion* 534 (tr. F. Sydenham (1759), pp. 42-4). Cf. E. Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and 'Kubla Khan'* (1966), pp. 245-6 and P. Adair, *The Waking Dream* (1967), pp. 138-9.
56. See my *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence*, ch. vii.
57. Cf. the 'great chrystal eye' of the ocean in 'Orchestra', Sir John Davies, *Poetical Works*, p. 155, and the occurrence in the poem of words such as 'eftsoones', 'Kirke', 'swound' and 'clomb', all of which are Spenserian.
58. See my 'Poems of the Supernatural', p. 82.
59. Cf. 'The whole scene moves and bustles momentarily'; *Piccolomini, PW*, II, p. 613.
60. 'Departing Year', l. 111; 'Three Graves', l. 520; 'Nightingale', l. 45; *Christabel*, l. 662. *PW*, I, pp. 166, 284, 235.
61. It bears a pencilled note, 'Sent by Mr. Southey, as an autograph of Coleridge'. J. Shelton, *loc. cit.*, p. 33.
62. See her account in *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson, Written by Herself* (1801), II, pp. 129-32. 'One night after bathing ... she swallowed ... near eighty drops of laudanum. Having slept for some hours, she awoke and, calling her daughter, desired her to take a pen and write what she should dictate ... she repeated, throughout, the admirable poem of The Maniac, much faster than it could be committed to paper.' Quoted Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and 'Kubla Khan'*, p. 86. Coleridge knew Mrs Robinson during the winter of 1799-1800.
63. The poem is in *The Poetical Works of the late Mrs Mary Robinson* (1806), II, pp. 298-303.
64. F. Alford, *Life, Journals and Letters of Henry Alford* (1873), p. 62.
65. Letter to Coleridge, 24-7 Dec. 1799. *EY*, pp. 279-80. Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and 'Kubla Khan'*, pp. 184-5, 208.
66. *Minnow among Tritons: Mrs S. T. Coleridge's Letters to Thomas Poole*, ed. S. Potter (1934), p. 13.
67. *The Examiner*, 2 June 1816, pp. 348-9, reprinted *Coleridge, the Critical Heritage*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (1970) (hereafter *CH*), pp. 205-8.
68. July 1816, I, pp. 632-6, reprinted *CH*, pp. 217-21.
69. *The Examiner*, 21 October 1821, pp. 664-7, reprinted *CH*, pp. 417-9.
70. *Westminster Review*, January 1830, XII, pp. i-31, reprinted *CH*, pp. 525-56.
71. C. Patmore 'The Contract', in *The Unknown Eros* (1877), p. 21. See also my *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 292 ff.

#### Abbreviations

*BL*: S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Engell and W. Jackson Bate, CC VII (2 vols., 1983)

*BLS*: S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (2 vols., Oxford, 1907)

*CC*: *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series LXXV, (London and New York, 1969- )

*CL*: *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (6 vols., Oxford, 1956-71)

*CM*: S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley, CC: XII (5 vols., London and Princeton, N.J., 1980- )

*CN*: *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn (6 vols., New York, 1957-73)

*EY*: *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn, *The Early Years, 1787-1805*, revised by C.L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967)

*H: Works The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (21 vols., 1930-4)

*LL(M): The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. Marrs (3 vols., New York, 1975-8)

*N&Q: Notes & Queries*

*PW: The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (2 vols., Oxford, 1912)

*Sh C: Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (2 vols., 1930)

*WPW: The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire (5 vols., Oxford, 1940-9)

## Criticism: Cyrus Hamlin (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: "The Faults of Vision: Identity and Poetry (A Dialogue of Voices, with an essay on *Kubla Khan*)" in *Identity of the Literary Text*, edited by Mario J. Valdes and Owen Miller, University of Toronto Press, 1985, pp. 119-45.

[In the following excerpt, Hamlin notes that "*Kubla Khan*" remains a challenge for critics because of its visionary and inspired text, and that while it is a poem that displays the Romantic power of imagination it is also a text that stands on its own as a poetic statement.]

### 'MINGLED MEASURE' IN *KUBLA KHAN*<sup>1</sup>

Sameron adion aso: but the to-morrow is yet to come.

*Kubla Khan* occupies a special place among English Romantic poems. Few texts have received so much critical attention, and few of the major Romantic lyrics make so persuasive a claim for what might be called visionary or inspired discourse. Romantic poetics privileges the powers of the imagination. This holds true for Coleridge above all. *Kubla Khan*, however problematic its status as text, seems to demonstrate with consummate eloquence and authority that singular poetic quality. Yet precisely because of this claim as poetry and because so much is at stake for a theory of poetry to which this text bears witness, *Kubla Khan* remains a challenge for criticism. No more crucial instance comes to mind for the question of identity in poetry.

.....

Despite the claim of the original published text to be a fragment and despite the biographical circumstances of its composition, as described in the prose preface which accompanied that publication (discussion of which is here omitted), *Kubla Khan* can and does stand on its own as a poetic statement, complete and self-sufficient. Nor can the organization of its language be denied a latent sense of coherent and unified design as a potentially conscious or even self-conscious work of art, despite the author's apparent denial of such design and such consciousness to himself at the occasion of writing the poem. It may even be argued, as has been done,<sup>2</sup> that the form of statement in the poem opens up at least the possibility of a transcendental response (in Kant's sense of the term as self-reference or self-reflection), whereby the act of reading the poem engenders in the mind of the reader a conscious awareness of the language as such, both in its design and in its self-reference. The outcome of such a reading—this is my central point, which has not, so far as I am aware, hitherto been made—is a complex transformation from a literal to a figurative or symbolic function for the poem as discourse. *Kubla Khan* thus becomes a paradigm for poetic discourse in general. A critical reading involves an act of recognition, whereby a hermeneutical consciousness of the poem is achieved as poetic



function. The identity of the text—if the term has any validity at all—must be found in the dynamic process through which this hermeneutical consciousness is achieved for the reader. It includes above all a tension between vision and reflectivity, established by discontinuities of discourse within the language of the text. These discontinuities impose a sense of transgression (in Stierle's sense) or *Sprung* (in Heidegger's sense), a figurative crossing-over which opens up a reflective, self-referential dimension to the poem.

## 1. THE POEM AS EVENT: 'QUIETLY SHINING'

What is the principle of organization for *Kubla Khan*? Much attention has been devoted by critics to irregularities of form, which to some might strengthen the case for the poem as visionary reverie, a speaking which does not know what it is saying, totally lacking in formal design. The stanza divisions show no formal principle of length, thus suggesting convenient demarkations of statement, as if the stanzas were paragraphs in a narrative. Yet the final stanza does indicate a significant turn in the movement of the poem, which justifies consideration of the text as if it were a composition in two movements.

The first movement focuses almost exclusively on the pleasure-dome of Kubla Khan and the exotic setting in which it is located. Certain shifts of focus and variations of tone may nonetheless be perceived, which allow the text to be arranged on the analogy of a classical sonata-allegro form in music (which I shall not attempt to justify further here), as follows:

Exposition: lines 1 to 11  
Development: lines 12 to 24  
Recapitulation: lines 25 to 30  
Coda: lines 31 to 36

A basic distinction is made throughout this movement between art and nature. The pleasure-dome is a man-made construct, exotic and elaborate, whereas the setting in which it is located is defined as a landscape through which the sacred river flows from its source in a fountain that bursts forth from a hidden cavern or chasm to its final destination in the 'sunless sea' (5) or 'lifeless ocean' (28). Little attention is actually paid to the pleasure-dome itself, apart from the initial assertion that it was built by the decree of the Khan. Descriptive material in the latter part of the exposition focuses entirely upon the landscape of the enclosed space within walls and towers, which consists of gardens and forests. A sense of symmetry and order is achieved here, where verbal form appears to imitate what it describes: art encloses nature. A quality of harmony and repose is attributed to the enclosure, which yet partakes of the life and power of nature: 'fertile ground' (6) is 'girdled round' (7). The pleasure-dome is mentioned again in the recapitulation, but there the focus is not the dome itself, but its shadow, reflected upon the moving surface of the river as it flows past. A curious displacement of concern thus occurs away from the palace of the Khan, first to the landscape which contains it and then to the surface of the river which reflects it.

The delineation of landscape remains curiously indeterminate. The river's course occupies the centre in highly schematic manner, as a force ('turmoil,' (17) and a sound ('tumult,' 28), projected upon both origin and destination, which constitute the limit of reference for this life. In the development an exotic and momentous significance is attributed to the act of bursting forth, through which the fountain emerges from 'that deep romantic chasm' (12). It is called 'a savage place' (14). Several figurative associations are superimposed upon the fountain, so that it assumes a complex significance as place and event. The place is given a supernatural aura: 'as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!' (14ff.). The force of the fountain is attributed to nature as an animate, if not a sentient being: 'as if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing' (18). Fragments of earth thrown up by the fountain are compared to natural and rustic activity: 'like rebounded hail, / Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail' (21f.). This sequence of similes opens up a pluralistic perspective, more general and fantastic than the place itself. The tone of the evocation is also made personal and emphatic by an exclamation: 'But oh' (12); by a

demonstrative: 'that deep romantic chasm' (12); and by an apostrophe: 'a savage place!' (14). These various verbal devices evoke a sense of design and intention to the poet's statement.

The movement of syntax is convoluted and accumulative in its rhetorical affect, as indicated by the use of repeated exclamation points and colons. Within this complex sequence, however, a spatial perspective is also established upon a middle ground, as if we ourselves were located within the pleasure-dome. This occurs through terms of position: 'amid' (20) and 'mid' (23), and interruption: 'intermitted' (20), enhanced by a sense of dramatic immediacy in the repeated adverb 'momently' (19 and 24), which offsets the sense of temporal and historical distance in the consistent use of narrative past tense. As the poem advances from development to recapitulation a marked shift of rhythmic cadence and phonetic patterning occurs, which resembles a kind of eddying (a favourite image of Coleridge) and which signals the movement within the poem from event to reflection upon the event. To offer one instance among many: an alliterative pattern of repeated consonants across two rhythmically balanced phrases within a single line evokes a sense of measured flow which is attributed to the river:

Five miles ... ea'ndering with a máz ... mot ... on

(25)

This line introduces the recapitulation, where phrases are repeated from the opening of the poem ('to a lifeless ocean,' 28, is a variant of 'to a sunless sea,' 5). Recognition of this repeated material thus occurs within a rhythmic and phonetic cadence of resolution and ceremonial reduction to the complex dramatic movement of the poem. A heightening of focus and accent is also achieved in the recapitulation through syntactical ellipsis and delay, so that the main subject of this continuous statement ('the sacred river,' 26) assumes a sense of climax, semantically and rhythmically. The pattern of rhyme across these lines also achieves a kind of balance and interaction which complements the effect of reflective eddying: *motion—ran—man—ocean*. The movement of the language at various formal levels thus forces the mind of the reader to turn back upon itself in company with the recapitulation of statement.

The figure of the emperor is also reintroduced at the end of the recapitulation. Initially he was invoked as the originating cause for the pleasure-dome; now through a subtle shift of reference he functions as an effect of or a response to his creation. At the beginning of the poem his role seemed to echo that of God as creator in Genesis, causing the palace to come into being by mere decree. Now we are told that the Khan hears the voices of his ancestors communicating a prophecy of war. What does this shift of roles signify? Presumably these voices are conveyed by the sound of the river, both in the tumult of its bursting forth and in its final sinking into the lifeless ocean. The emperor thus hears a sound 'from far' (29) which is interpreted as the murmuring of spectral voices. Such a response also suggests a symbolic substitution, whereby the river is associated with the course of human life from birth to death. Recognition of this substitution further opens up a sense of analogy between the role of the emperor in his interpretive response and our own role as readers interpreting the poem. The response of the Khan thus serves as a hermeneutical signal for the task of interpretation as such. The emperor was identified initially as creator, a kind of surrogate for the author of the poem (even if that association was not explicit), and now has been transformed into a mere recipient, a kind of auditory exegete, responding to the sounds which reach him as the effect of his own creative act. By recognizing the analogy between this shift of roles and our own hermeneutical task as readers we also may identify the fundamental structural design of the poem as a communicative strategy, whereby the act of reading the text accompanies the movement of the poem through a sympathetic imitation: from descriptive inquiry towards interpretive response. This shift also suggests how we as readers may relate to the poet as author, in a relation *not* of identity but of reciprocity, which is appropriate to the dynamic, dialectical form of communication itself.

On the basis of this perceived relationship as communicative strategy, we may locate in the coda a further strategy of figuration and self-referential resonance. There is a twofold focus here. First, the image or 'shadow' (31) of the pleasure-dome is reflected upon the surface of the river as it flows past. To *float midway* (32) is to attain the privileged status of the symbol, where temporality is transcended or, in Hegel's sense, sublated. Second, the sounds of tumult from the river in the origin and completion of its course are transformed into a 'mingled measure' (33) in the manner of a musical harmony. Senses of sight and sound are thus conjoined: presumably for the emperor, as for the poet and for the reader of his poem. To perceive and enjoy this experience requires a shared dwelling within that pleasure-dome as symbolic space, which conveys both the vision of reflected resonance and the mingled measure of harmonious sound. The poem itself thus becomes identical with this space through symbolic transference and the self-reflective turn of figuration. The meaning achieved at this moment within the poem involves for the reader an act of self-recognition, since the hermeneutical response of his own mind is included within the symbolic reference of the poem's statement. The couplet which concludes the coda constitutes the climax and fulfilment of the poem as a whole, in so far as it conveys to us our own experience as readers within the hermeneutical consciousness attained by our reading of the poem:

It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

(35f.)

The poem may now be understood as *event*, in Heidegger's sense: *Er-eignis*, both as 'en-own-ment' and as 'en-eye-ment.'

What can be made of the 'caves of ice'? At one level the validity of the phrase is apparent. The indeterminate copula ('it was') includes both the pleasure-dome itself and its reflected image upon the surface of the river. The mingled measure from fountain and cave is superimposed upon this ambivalence of a resonating preserve. As a symbol of art it is a fixed and unchanging value within a dynamic movement and a mingling of sounds: *Dauer im Wechsel*. Yet equally we may refer this phrase to the poem itself as artefact or verbal construct, which like a 'cave of ice' is inhuman and lifeless. The image thus sustains a sense of art as pure reflectivity, an ambivalent paradigm for vision as both shine and sheen (in the dual sense of the term *Schein* defined by both Schiller and Hegel).<sup>3</sup> Here also that sense of poetry as verbal event is affirmed in Heidegger's sense of a resonating preserve ('der in sich schwingende Bereich'), where the moment is realized and known. The opposition of sunlight and ice, established by balanced phrases as a reciprocity of identity and difference, conveys the deepest paradox of what Coleridge understood to be the poetic imagination. Readers of Coleridge will recall another symbolic image, equally powerful and precisely correlative to this, where reflected light is revealed in a fixed and frozen form. This occurs at the end of *Frost at Midnight* in the image of the icicle, frozen water drops, dangling from the eaves of the poet's cottage, which is seen through the window in the wintry night: 'quietly shining to the quiet moon.'

## 2. THE POEM AS THROUGH A GLASS: DARKLY REFLECTING

The critical moment of figurative transgression in *Kubla Khan* occurs at the outset of the final verse paragraph of the poem. It is a moment of categorical reversal, of disruption, disillusionment and deconstruction, of crossing-over in the most radical sense. Reference shifts, on one hand, to the 'damsel with a dulcimer' (37), conjured apparently out of the poet's own memory; and the poet introduces himself, on the other, as first-person pronominal subject for the first time in the poem. All apparent concern with Kubla Khan and his pleasure-dome is abruptly abandoned by arbitrary displacement. This transgression from descriptive subject matter to the subjective self was anticipated by the strategies of reflective figuration which preceded it. The movement of the poem may thus be perceived as an advance beyond its moment of visionary climax through a disruptive response, which sustains and completes the symbolic action of the poem in the manner of a

dialectical negation. The full import of this movement for the hermeneutical reception of the text needs further consideration.

What is the relation of the damsel to the pleasure-dome? How does the vision here claimed by the poetic self as something once seen relate to the development of his previous description into poetic event? More specifically, within the temporal continuum of the poem as fictional historical narrative, how is the assertion of a particular moment of experience—‘once’ (38)—to be referred back to the remote setting of the opening movement? It is presumably no accident that an identical form of indeterminate generic statement with the verb *to be* occurs both at the end of the first movement and near the outset of the second: ‘It was ...’ (35 and 39), both times at the beginning of a line. Given the remoteness of Kubla Khan and his world to the poet and the position he occupies as speaker in both time and space, the question of relationship between description and vision becomes extremely problematic. An awareness of this problem is central to the hermeneutical design of the final movement.

The subject of the damsel's song is Mount Abora, which remains unrelated, except through patterns of sound, to Xanadu and the river Alph. Yet, through a displacement of discourse into the subjunctive mood of a condition contrary to fact, a hypothetical analogy is established between the song of the Abyssinian maid and the poet's own poem. May we therefore associate the damsel's song with the simile used earlier of the ‘woman wailing for her demon-lover’ (16), whose manner was associated with the ‘savage place’ (14) of the river's birth? The common denominator is vision, and the medium of communication in each instance would be ‘symphony and song’ (43), received once by the poet ‘in a vision’ (38) and now to be revived ‘within me’ (42) through a recreative act of the poetic imagination. The automatic and inevitable consequence of such a recreative act, we are told, would be a ‘music loud and long’ (45). Even more, to achieve such music of vision would be to ‘build that dome in air, / That sunny dome! those caves of ice!’ (46f.) What does this mean?

Such allusion to the earlier focus of the poem on the pleasure-dome involves a radical opposition to the project of its own discourse. Earlier the pleasure-dome and caves of ice were evoked as image and as paradigm, recalled and reconstructed within the descriptive language of the poem as fictional event. The final couplet of that movement established a reflective, hermeneutical perspective of self-reference, *as if* ‘it was’ (35 and 39) had become ‘this is.’ Now all possibility of such realization is removed into a subjunctive alternative: ‘if only.’ The poem thus seems to undo everything it earlier achieved. Equally important for a hermeneutical reading of the poem is the assertion that a reconstruction of sunny dome and caves of ice, the possibility of which is implicitly denied, would *not* be a reflection or shadow upon the surface of the sacred river or a mingled measure of murmuring spirit voices, but rather an aerial palace suspended impossibly in the sky like some cloud, signifying the distance and insubstantiality of poetic vision or imaginative *Schein*. How does this second dome relate to the first?

The two constructs appear initially to oppose each other, as description opposes vision, or as reality (event) opposes idea (image). Upon reflection, however, we perceive that the two are identical, both within the fictional or poetic world of the poem and within the mind of the recreative imagination, regardless of the recipient of that recreation: Kubla Khan, the Abyssinian maid (as she sings to her dulcimer), the poet (as he speaks in and through his poem), and ourselves (as we read this text). The only difference—and it is the crucial difference for hermeneutical consciousness—resides in the affect of that figurative transgression which occurred in the movement from one section of the poem to the other. The shadow of the dome was initially affirmed as a figure of capable imagination, the product of a willing suspension of disbelief; reference to it latterly involves displacement through several levels of negation or deconstruction, so that it serves as a conscious, indeed a self-conscious, sign for the poem itself, not as it has been achieved, but as it might be in an ideal instance. The content of that sign, its transcendental referent, is thus the norm for poetic vision, performing in the manner of a transcendent signified for the discourse of the poem as a play of signifiers, against which the actual movement of that discourse may be measured as negative instance (in Hegel's sense of the negative).

How appropriate, finally, that the language of the poem shifts its focus at the end through a further ironic displacement to a hypothetical recipient for such visionary song. This recipient turns out to be, as the last playful surrogate for the identity of the text, the reader of *Kubla Khan*, indeed we ourselves, at least within a figure of hermeneutical response. About that poet singing of his vision in a fine frenzy, whose voice until now has been tacitly accepted as the vehicle for the entire text of this poem, we ourselves are made to utter the concluding lines (49-54) as a warning to dissociate ourselves from the madness of his vision. Everything which constituted the fiction of the pleasure-dome as event and even the damsel's song as vision has now collapsed into a hyperbole of affect. We share in it only vicariously through a distancing of perspective, a dissociation of sensibility, which we ourselves impose—or rather: the final lines of the poem do it *for us*. The poet's state of mind as he produces his visionary song is relegated to a kind of madness, manifested by such clichés as 'his flashing eyes' and 'his floating hair' (50). The exclamation by this hypothetical audience of 'all who heard' (48) even assumes the rhetorical form of a second-person address in the imperative mood. In effect, we are giving commands to each other, indeed to all readers. The effect of such a statement, as further enhancement to the thematic reflectivity of our hermeneutical consciousness, is that the poem speaks directly to us in our own voice, so that our position and attitude are categorically differentiated from those of the poet. The discourse of the lyric, through a final transgression, thus dispels all sense of presence and breaks all sense of poetic illusion. Where are we left at the end but in the real world, beyond the limits of vision, outside the magic circle which we ourselves have drawn about the poet, to separate us from all possible exchange with that lunatic mind which fed on 'honey-dew' (53) and drank 'the milk of Paradise' (54)? Our compensation must be that the language of the poem has also moved with us to the outside, thus sharing in the breakdown of its vision, indeed causing it through an imperious usurpation of our own voice. The implications of all this for the concept of identity are disturbing.

It may now be instructive by way of conclusion to this essay on the poem to consider briefly the prose preface which Coleridge included with the initial publication of the text in 1816. Whether or not this preface reports accurately the biographical circumstances in which the poem was composed may be of less interest than the ironic thematic association of the situation there described with the hypothetical status of the poet as visionary within the poem. The opium dream in which the poem is said to have been composed may thus be identified with the frenzy of vision attributed to the poet at the end of the poem. Also important is the use of water images to describe the failure of the poet's vision when he endeavoured to write down his dream after waking up. Following the interruption by his visitor, he asserts, 'all the rest [of the vision] had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter.' He then quotes a passage from his poem *The Pains of Sleep*, which was included in the initial publication just after *Kubla Khan*, where a similar image of concentric circles upon the surface of water is used to signify the disruption of a vision, like the breaking of a spell. The hope is there expressed that the smoothness of the surface will soon return, re-establishing the lost vision as in a mirror or a glass. May we not refer this image of the reflecting surface of water to the central symbol of the poem itself: 'The shadow of the dome of pleasure / Floated midway on the waves' (31f.)? Such continuity must be more than accidental and suggests, further, that the apparent fragmentary status of the written text may contrast with the vision it seeks to recapture in the way that the smooth surface of the water relates to the concentric rippling which results when the surface is disturbed.

A thematic analogy may also be perceived between the dissociation of the reader from the poet at the end of the poem and the interruption of the act of writing by the arrival of the visitor from Porlock on business in the prose preface. To refer both these moments of disruption to the act of reading may go beyond any apparent intention on Coleridge's part, although within the poem it seems unavoidable as analogy *for the reader*. Yet such ironic transformations are precisely appropriate to the dialectical movement of thought: through moments of projected vision towards a position of reflective self-awareness by means of a cognitive response to patterns of figurative transgression and the breakdown of vision. Not unrelated to this strategy of ironic dissociation is the initial assertion in the preface that the author is only publishing his fragment 'at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity' (whom scholars inform us was Lord Byron), and that, as far as the

author is concerned, the text serves ‘rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits.’ Do we not perceive a bit of tongue in cheek here? Yet that request by a fellow poet, perhaps in analogy to the decree of Kubla Khan for the construction of the pleasure dome, shifts the burden of *authority* away from the poet himself, who nonetheless remains the source of the vision represented in the fragment, and attributes the claim for publication to what must be regarded as a response to a *reading* of the text, including presumably a hermeneutical consciousness of what the text is capable of communicating concerning that vision which the poet claims to have been lost.

These several levels of related paradoxical distinctions between vision and reflection, both in the text of the poem and in the prose preface, serve to enhance and sustain that hermeneutical consciousness in the reader, which I take to be the ultimate communicative purpose of such texts. The meaning of poetic vision thus remains always and only accessible to our interpretive understanding, as Coleridge well knew, from the distance of a disillusionment, like the circles upon the surface of the water or the faults in a crystal, a sense of absence or distance rather than presence, indeed as an image of a paradise which has always just been lost at the moment it is glimpsed. The measure of identity for a reader of poetry, as a reflective knowledge to be achieved, is the radical breakdown and destruction of the principle of identity itself.

### Notes

1. In order to reduce the length of the present essay for inclusion in the current volume on the Identity of the Literary Text, a section of about seven pages in typescript was omitted from the discussion of *Kubla Khan* (the lacuna is indicated by the line of dots). What I have omitted is a brief survey of the publication history of the poem and the history of its critical reception. This material, however important for a reassessment of the poem in the context of Coleridge scholarship, did not seem essential to the discussion of identity. The complete text of the essay will be published in a collection of my essays forthcoming under the title *The Hermeneutics of Form*. The poem and its prose preface are printed following the notes.
2. Kenneth Burke, “‘Kubla Khan,’ Proto-Surrealist Poem,” in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, Berkeley 1968, pp. 201-22; esp. pp. 209f.
3. The basic ambivalence of the term *Schein* for aesthetic theory was first perceived by Schiller in his letters to Körner in 1793, which have come to be known as the *Kallias-Briefe*, since he there outlines plans for an essay on the theory of beauty to be entitled ‘Kallias.’ The letters are printed together in the volume of *Theoretische Schriften*, in the edition of Schiller's works, ed. Fricke and Göpfert, München 1959, v, 394-433. For Hegel on *Schein*, see note 9 above. I have discussed this ambivalence in an earlier essay, ‘The Temporality of Selfhood: Metaphor and Romantic Poetry,’ *New Literary History*, 6 (1974-5), 169-93, esp. pp. 174f.

## Criticism: Fred L. Milne (essay date 1986)

SOURCE: “Coleridge's ‘Kubla Khan’: A Metaphor for the Creative Process,” *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 51, No. 4, November, 1986, pp. 17-29.

[In the following essay, Milne explores the idea that “Kubla Khan” is a poem about the creative process, focusing on the landscape, the figure of Kubla Khan, and the vision of Xanadu presented in the work.]

### I

Although debate continues over whether or not the headnote Coleridge published with “Kubla Khan” in 1816 should be regarded as a factual account of the poem's origin, recent studies have suggested that regardless of its basis in fact the headnote serves most importantly as what Warren Stevenson calls an “imaginative adjunct

to the poem” (606). In that context, the headnote can be seen as “a prose imitation of the poem it introduces,” functioning “in part as argument and gloss” (Chayes 4). Such an understanding of the headnote reinforces the view that “Kubla Khan” is a poem about the creative process. To say that certainly is not new, but the reading that follows, while benefiting from those preceding it, differs from them in its interpretation of specific elements in the poem, particularly the function of Kubla Khan.

According to the account given in the headnote, Coleridge sensed that he composed a poem in simultaneous response to a vision seen during “a profound sleep, at least of the external senses” (*Poetical Works* 296). He asserts that “he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (296). In other words, not only the content (“all the images”), but also the form (“the correspondent expressions”) for the extended poem were simultaneously given during the vision. Together they presented themselves as a fully realized creation in the mind of the sleeping or entranced Coleridge. All that remained for him to do upon waking was to embody the creation in written form, that is, transfer it from mind to paper, thereby giving it an externalized mode of existence. That, according to the headnote, is exactly what Coleridge set about when he awoke. Having “a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, [he] instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved” (296). Had the act of transferring the “composition” from mind to paper been completed, it would have represented the final but all-important step in the creative process, for externalizing the artist’s conception not only gives it a concrete embodiment, but also makes it accessible to others who can then respond to it as the artist responded. Unfortunately, this last step of the creative process was interrupted by “a person on business from Porlock” who detained Coleridge “above an hour,” after which he found “that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!” (296).

Critics disagree on just how much of the published poem actually reflects the vision. Some maintain that it is only the first two stanzas, the third stanza having been added later as a postscript explaining why the poem could not be finished in its original form (Schneider 247-48). Still others think Coleridge wrote all fifty-four lines between his waking and the interruption (Stevenson 605). Another possibility, supported I think by the headnote, is that the published poem incorporates in the first stanza, which corresponds closely with *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, the work Coleridge was reading when he fell asleep, the “eight or ten scattered lines and images” committed to paper between Coleridge’s waking and the interruption by the man from Porlock.<sup>1</sup> The rest of the poem as published is most probably the result of later composition, for Coleridge claims at the end of the headnote that “from still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him” (297). Thus, realizing that the essence of what would have been a poem of “two to three hundred lines” had been forever lost, Coleridge ended by composing from the surviving fragments a very different poem. Incorporating what had originally been “given to him,” he adapted that to a new purpose suggested by his experience—a poem about the creative process itself.

Although it ostensibly serves only to explain the circumstances surrounding the original but never fully executed conception for an extended poem, the headnote’s real significance lies in what it reveals about the tenuous nature of the creative moment. In that sense, the headnote signals the subject of the poem it introduces and provides a context for reading the poem. Thus, debate over the literal truth of certain details in the headnote, interesting as it may be in terms of Coleridge biography, is not really relevant to an understanding of the poem. What does it matter if Coleridge correctly or incorrectly remembers the year of the original but abortive composition?<sup>2</sup> What does it matter whether the conception came in a “profound sleep,” as claimed in the headnote, or in a “sort of Reverie,” as claimed in the Crewe MS? Even if the entire headnote were a fabrication, which I do not think it is, it would not significantly change its relationship to the poem. Its

function would remain the same; it would still serve to establish a context for reading “Kubla Khan.”

## II

The landscape described in stanzas one and two of “Kubla Khan” is the usual starting point for any reading of the poem in terms of the creative process. Even if, as I believe, the first stanza basically reflects all that was transcribed of the grand poem conceived during the vision, it nevertheless stands in close relationship with the second stanza, the two forming a unit but differing in focus, as I shall explain later. The relational pattern established in the first two stanzas between the chasm, fountain, river, caverns, and underground sea does suggest the mind and its activities. As Irene Chayes argues, “the landscape with its descending levels would be the mind as structure, and the processes within it, summed up in the flowing of the river, ‘meandering with a mazy motion,’ the mind as activity” (7). Because some have assumed that Xanadu is a specific element or locale within the landscape to be isolated and identified as merely the enclosure decreed by Kubla Khan (Shelton 35-37), it should be emphasized from the outset that the poem reads “In Xanadu” not “At Xanadu.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, everything described in the first two stanzas is “In Xanadu”—the fountain, chasm, river, caverns, sea, as well as Kubla Khan, his garden and his pleasure-dome. If the landscape reflects the mind and its activities, then Xanadu is the symbolic name for the mind.

The basic structural feature of Xanadu is its circularity, defined by the course of Alph, “the sacred river” (line 3). Rising out of the “deep romantic chasm” (l. 12) amid the turbulent but intermittent gushings of a “mighty fountain” (l. 19) which is its source in the upper or visible region of Xanadu, the river flows “with a mazy motion / Through wood and dale” (ll. 25-26) until it reaches “the caverns measureless to man” (l. 27). There it descends “in tumult” (l. 28) into what is called alternately a “sunless sea” (l. 5) or “lifeless ocean” (l. 28), that is, into the lower, hidden region of Xanadu. What I call the visible and hidden regions of Xanadu correspond to the conscious and unconscious realms of the mind, an identification Chayes terms “fundamental to the meaning of the first two stanzas” (7). The course of the river unites those two realms, for as Warren Stevenson points out, “the river presumably returns to the fountain via the sunless sea, like a serpent with its tail in its mouth—the ancient symbol of eternity” (609; see also Gerber 334-35). In so doing, the river both completes and renews its circular flow which then becomes perpetual in its motion. Stevenson’s reference to the *ouroboros*, a symbol frequently employed by the Gnostics and the alchemists, is quite apropos. In some versions of the symbol, the serpent’s body is half light and half dark, suggesting a basic dichotomy united through the circle. The structure of the Xanadu landscape is analogous in that it encompasses both light and dark, visible and hidden, conscious and unconscious aspects united through the circular course of the river. Because the circular pattern in Xanadu involves motion, it is also analogous in function to the meaning attached to circular motion by the alchemists for whom it signified “that which brings into being, activates and animates all forces in a given process, sweeping them along with it, including those forces which would otherwise act against each other” (Cirlot 235).<sup>4</sup> As the basic structural pattern of the Xanadu mind-landscape, circular motion allows depiction of the conscious and unconscious, the measured and measureless aspects co-existing in the mind’s processes. The perpetual, circular course of the river reflects the unity of the diverse and seemingly opposed elements.

Each element within the poem’s mind-landscape must now be more precisely identified. Although I agree with Chayes’s basic interpretation of the landscape’s symbolic meaning, I disagree with her identification of specific elements within the landscape. To identify the fountain in “Kubla Khan” with creativity and say it “corresponds to the imagination in its primary sense” (9-10) goes too far. The fountain is a necessary component for creativity in the poem, but it does not serve as a creative power in any sense that would be analogous to the imagination. If anything, its “ceaseless turmoil seething” suggests something vital but nevertheless chaotic. As the immediate source of the river in the visible or conscious region of Xanadu, the fountain and the chasm from which it “momently” gushes represent the well-spring through which the unconscious becomes conscious. The fountain-chasm symbolizes the initiating point of conscious thought, depicted as a violent but potentially fertile springing forth from what has been “sunless” and “lifeless,” dark



and unformed. Because the passage from the unconscious to the conscious is shrouded in mystery, the place where that passage or birth occurs is appropriately “holy and enchanted” (14), like the originating stage of life itself.

Just as it goes too far to identify the fountain with the imagination in its primary sense, Chayes's claim that the river “corresponds to the secondary imagination” (10) is unconvincing. Like the fountain, the river is also a necessary condition for creativity in that it presumably fertilizes the ground upon which creation takes place in the poem, but the river itself is not a creative power any more than the fountain is. Nevertheless, even as the fountain is “holy and enchanted,” the river is properly termed “sacred” because it represents the stream of thought; it is the life of the mind, the unifying first principle of all mental activity, signified by its name, Alph. As indicated earlier, the river flows through the conscious realm of Xanadu from a source ultimately rooted in the unconscious to a terminal point that returns it once again to that dark, mysterious region. In contrast to the fountain-chasm, the “caverns measureless to man” (4) represent the initiating point of the unfathomable unconscious, the “sunless” or “lifeless” underground sea. There, the river is seemingly lost as it becomes undifferentiated in the formless sea but only to well up again through the fountain-chasm, ever new yet ever the same.

### III

If indeed “Kubla Khan” became, as Coleridge “frequently purposed to finish” the original fragment, a poem about the creative process set in the general context of the mind and its activities, then where, if not in the fountain or the river, is the creative power to be found? What element in the poem corresponds to that “synthetic and magical power” that “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” defined in the *Biographia Literaria* (174) as the imagination? According to Coleridge, the imagination is the mind’s “shaping or modifying power” (*Biographia* 160),<sup>5</sup> the “true inward creatrix,” that “instantly out of the chaos of elements or shattered fragments of memory, puts together some form to fit it” (*Anima Poetae* 206). In the poem, that function is best fulfilled by Kubla Khan himself, for it is he alone who creates in the mind-landscape.

To say that Kubla Khan represents the imagination necessarily rejects previous suggestions that he is “fierce and cruel” (Beer 222), that he resembles an “Augustan gentleman as seen through Romantic eyes” (Watson 28), or that “in the context of the poem Kubla Khan occupies a relatively limited place” (Chayes 5). Even though he is neither a symbol of God nor of “Mankind” (Suther 189), his role in the poem is all-important, a point reinforced by the very title of the poem, and recognized by Knight (93) and House (120) before me. As the mind’s creative power, Kubla Khan is a reflection of the divine in man, what Coleridge calls “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite i am” (*Biographia* 167). As the imagination, Kubla Khan resides in the mind—“In Xanadu”—and there he creates the visions that must then be embodied in art.

Kubla Khan’s creation best justifies his identification as the imagination. Considered in its totality, his creation reflects a triple structure, and Coleridge would have known that three is the Pythagorean number signifying completion and the synthesis of opposing elements (Cirlot 222). At the center of Kubla’s creation stands the pleasure-dome with its opposing elements of sun and ice unified into what is later called “a miracle of rare device” (l. 35). Surrounding the dome and forming the second of the three structural divisions are “gardens bright with sinuous rills” (l. 8) and “forests ancient as the hills” (l. 10). Like the sun and ice of the dome, the gardens and forests reflect opposing elements, the gardens suggesting the ordered, cultivated, and artificial and the forests the free, untamed, and natural. Yet, despite their opposition, both seem to blend harmoniously in their “here” and “there” placement around the dome. They are further unified by the third structural division of Kubla’s creation, for the gardens and forests are in turn “with walls and towers ... girdled round” (7). Even this third division reflects a union of opposites, the walls representing the horizontal and the towers the vertical or even perhaps the feminine and masculine respectively.<sup>6</sup> Some have speculated that the outer

enclosure of walls and towers forms a square or rectangle (Suther 242; Woodring 362-63), but the words “girdled round” suggest that even this portion is circular in shape. Imagistically, Kubla's entire creation could be said to resemble a domed, three-tiered crown, the walls and towers forming the outer circlet. As such, the creation emblems Kubla's crowning achievement: his transmutation of opposing elements into a unified whole symbolizing perfection. As described in the first stanza, the creation reflects the shaping and modifying, the balancing and reconciling power of imagination, not, as Chayes argues, the mere “work of the arranging and ornamenting fancy” (8). The idea of achieved perfection is further implied by the “twice five miles” occupied by the total creation (a dimension I take as referring to the diameter of the whole circular structure), for ten is the Pythagorean number that raises all things to unity and is considered the number of perfection (Cirlot 223).

In addition to denigrating Kubla himself, some critics have faulted his creation because its purpose is pleasure, but that reflects an underestimation of the positive connotation Coleridge attached to the word when used in the context of poetry or art in general. As the product of Kubla's decree, the circular, tripartite enclosure should be understood as a unified artistic conception, reflecting both completeness and perfection in the relation of its parts to each other and to the whole. As such, it symbolizes a potential work of art, or, more particularly, a potential poem. In terms of Coleridge's own definition, pleasure must necessarily be one of its essential attributes:

A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole* as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*.

(*Biographia* 172)

Thus, pleasure or delight is the first or immediate object of a poem, and Kubla's creation would fulfill that requirement. Nothing in the poem qualifies the word “pleasure” in any negative way, nor should the word be contrasted with “delight” in stanza three.<sup>7</sup> As the passage from the *Biographia* suggests, Coleridge uses the two words interchangeably in the context of art, and the same holds true for their usage in “Kubla Khan.”

I have said that Kubla Khan's creation symbolizes a potential poem. As described in the first two stanzas, the creation exists only “In Xanadu”; it has yet to be given the final mode of existence that would make it a work of art in the true sense. All of the balancing and reconciling of opposing elements in the creation, which reflect the power of imagination, are effected through Kubla's decree. One gets the impression that “In Xanadu” Kubla's decree gives immediate existence to the creation—the dome, the gardens and forests, the walls and towers. That impression is reinforced if the first two lines of the poem are compared with Coleridge's recollection of the passage he was reading from *Purchas His Pilgrimage* at the moment he fell into his “profound sleep.” As given in the headnote, the passage supposedly read ““Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built”” (296). In other words, Kubla ordered it, and the palace was built, presumably by others. However, in the poem, “commanded ... to be built” becomes “did ... decree” (1-2). No mention is made of building in stanza one. It is as if Kubla decrees and, by fiat of that decree, the thing instantly exists. The act of building is unnecessary “In Xanadu” because the imagination is a “synthetic and magical power” which “instantly out of the chaos of elements ... puts together some form to fit it.” Significantly, the only reference to building in the poem comes later in stanza three, and there it is the “I” who proclaims he “would build that dome in air” (46). I think the hiatus between the “decree” of stanza one and the “build” of stanza three is crucial to an understanding of the poem as a metaphorical expression of the mind's creative process. Without the actual step of building, which implies precisely the “consciousness of effort” Coleridge maintains was missing during the “composition” evoked by the vision, Kubla's creation has only a conceptual reality in Xanadu. As evidenced in the second stanza, that reality is tenuous.

Whereas the first stanza focuses on Kubla's creation itself, the second stanza focuses on that creation in relation to the surrounding landscape, particularly the river. Chayes has argued that the course of the river in the second stanza "must be understood as on a second circuit" (11), but I see no compelling reason why that must be so. Both stanzas can be seen as providing different perspectives on a single moment—the moment of Kubla's decree and the resulting creation. The instant Kubla's creation came into existence, it would be reflected on the river, and that is how it is seen in the second stanza. Because its reflection is projected midway on the waves between the "ceaseless turmoil" of the fountain and the "tumult" of the caverns leading to the "lifeless ocean," Kubla's creation has an uncertain reality in relation to the river:

The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
 Floated midway on the waves;  
 Where was heard the mingled measure  
 From the fountain and the caves.

(31-34)

Although it presumably fertilized the ground where Kubla's creation came to be, the river merely allows the "shadow" of that creation to be reflected back on itself, the only reality assigned to Kubla's work in stanza two, and a rather insubstantial reality it is. The stream of thought supplies imagination with the "fertile ground" upon which to exercise its "synthetic and magical power," and it simultaneously serves as the mirror upon which the imagination projects or reflects its creation, thereby giving it a conscious but not a concrete reality. That reality is not only shadowy or conceptual, but also temporary or impermanent because the reflection is projected "midway on the waves" at a point of momentary equipoise, manifested as a "mingled measure" between "turmoil" and "tumult." The next "momently" eruption from the fountain will propel the river on its way toward the caverns. The "mingled measure" or equipoise will be disrupted and the shadow-reflection of the "miracle of rare device" carried away and soon dissolved, just as in the headnote Coleridge had said of the original vision that "all had passed away like images on a stream into which a stone has been cast." Because the river is moving toward the caverns that lead to the formless sea of the unconscious, it is appropriate that from there Kubla hears "Ancestral voices prophesying war" (30). Those voices are the harbingers of the destruction and dissolution awaiting the shadow of his creation as the river carries its image toward the descent into the unconscious. The voices are "Ancestral" because they represent recollection of past losses even as they foretell the one that is about to occur.

If stanza one begins with creation, stanza two ends with impending destruction. Together the first two stanzas parallel in symbolic terms the argument of the headnote. Although the actual dissolution of Kubla's creation is not depicted in the poem, use of the past tense in the first two stanzas confirms that the prophesied destruction took place. As Woodring points out, "the poem speaks of the dome and pleasure-grounds uniformly in the past tense. The dome was; it is no longer. Something greater ... has destroyed it" (363). That "something greater" is the powerful current of the mind's complex thought processes which foster both creation and destruction. The power of imagination is, as Coleridge once acknowledged, "a dim Analogue of Creation" (*Letters* 2: 1034). Unlike the infinite Creator, the imagination is finite in power, its creations subject to what Coleridge calls "the flux and reflux" (*Biographia* 268) of the mind which, like a kaleidoscope, always changes. Thus, the creation of stanza one is a floating shadow in stanza two, and both have been lost in the passage of time.

#### IV

The only counter against the implied loss is missing from the first two stanzas, but it is recognized and celebrated in stanza three, an integral part of the poem's metaphor, not a mere postscript. As Chayes argues, stanza three is a corrective stanza, but it does not reflect a "new creative process" (17) at work in the poem itself. The third stanza is corrective in that it suggests what should have been the final stage of the creative

process begun in stanza one with Kubla's decree. Addressing the question of the relation of stanza three to the rest of the poem, Stevenson says that "What Coleridge has done is leave a rhetorical gap between conception and execution" (629). The sense of such a gap is reinforced, as I suggested earlier, by the hiatus between Kubla's decree, representing conception, and any reference to building, corresponding to what Stevenson calls execution. Preservation of the imagination's conceptions from the "flux and reflux" threatening their destruction demands that they be built, that is, somehow embodied or externalized, thereby giving them concrete reality outside the mind. Only when it is built or executed does an imaginative conception move from a potential to an actual work of art. The picture must be painted, the statue sculpted, the poem written to be considered finally as fully realized works of art. In other words, the artist must act on the conception; there must be "consciousness of effort," reflecting what Coleridge calls imagination "coexisting with the conscious will" (*Biographia* 167). Through an effort of will, the artist can, as it were, rescue the conception and give it an external form through art. That finalizing step is the subject of stanza three.

The vision of the damsel with the dulcimer singing of Mt. Abora symbolizes the artist in the act of executing what has been conceived or created. Because this vision is also from the past, it may reflect Coleridge's own past achievements, but more likely it represents those of artists in general that serve as models or examples for the "I" of stanza three. As depicted, the damsel gives outward expression to her own inner vision or imaginative conception in "symphony and song." In so doing, she transmits her conception and awakens in those who hear a responding sense of pleasure or delight. Together her "symphony and song" is analogous to the written poem, the symphony or underlying melody corresponding to the poem's rhythm or meter and the song to its words or images, both combined as a unified expression that embodies and externalizes the inner conception.<sup>8</sup>

The "I" of stanza three is the poet recognizing the need to bridge the gap between conception and execution, between the decree and the building. To that end, he would follow the damsel's example:

Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

(42-47)

The union of symphony and song, meter and word, form and content would allow the poet to execute Kubla's decree by building the "dome in air." However, the conditional "Could I ... I would" does not mean that the "I" of the poem can or will be able to do so, but the very recognition of what would follow could he in fact revive the power of expression closes the poem with what Stevenson calls "a triumphant affirmation of the divine potentialities of poetry" (629; also House 116). Thus, the final emphasis in the poem falls on the effects that would be produced on those who hear the poet's own music/poem. If only conditionally, the creative process has been carried to its completion within the poem itself.

Thus, the original poem begun but never finished becomes finally a poem about the creative process, symbolically depicting the unexpressed fragility of the original conception while at the same time affirming the powerful effect of that conception when built or expressed through the efforts of the poet's conscious will working in tandem with imagination. Of course, the great irony is the poem produced from the fragment of the initial failure. If the original conception decreed by the imagination was lost in the "lifeless ocean" of Coleridge's unconscious after the interruption by the "person on business from Porlock," subsequent pulsations from the fountain supplied his imagination with new "elements or shattered fragments of memory" sufficient for a new conception, allowing Coleridge himself to overcome the conditional terms used in stanza three and actually build the dome "in air." The published poem is a finished work about a fragment. The three

stanzas of the published poem reflect in their own “symphony and song” the lost tripartite creation once decreed by Kubla Khan in the Xanadu of the poet’s mind.

#### Notes

1. Although Chayes also believes that if “any portion of ‘Kubla Khan’ was actually composed during the ‘reverie’ (*not* sleep) acknowledged in the note to the Crewe MS., or was in Coleridge’s mind when he wrote his later prose myth of composition by vision, it might well have been this stanza” (9), I cannot accept her contention that stanza one reflects “a relatively low level” (8) of creative power corresponding to the work of fancy rather than imagination. Schneider’s study of the complex metrics in stanza one tends to support my hypothesis that if it is basically the “eight or ten” line remnant from the original vision, then Coleridge incorporated the remnant in a polished form as a unified stanza in the poem we now have. See Schneider, Chapter 5.
2. Schneider has disputed Coleridge’s claim that the poem was composed in 1797 and argues for a later date (153-237). For evidence supporting Coleridge’s claim, see Chambers (78-80). I believe critics too readily fault Coleridge’s memory of dates. In that regard, see my study on “Pantisocracy.”
3. Two recent studies focus on details suggesting that Coleridge, either consciously or unconsciously, had specific locales in mind as he composed “Kubla Khan.” Piper argues that “the poem evokes not one paradise but two, Paradise Lost and Paradise Restored, and that a great deal of the other imagery of the poem, though not paradisaical, probably arose out of Coleridge’s reading and meditation on the theme of the two Paradises. Indeed even their geography plays an important part in the landscape and structure of the poem” (148). Stelzig has argued that the landscape in “Kubla Khan” matches that of an actual place called the Valley of Rocks near Linton on the seacoast, a place Coleridge had visited with Hazlitt (316-18).
4. For further discussion of the symbolism of alchemy, see Jung.
5. This and the preceding expression more consistently reflect Coleridge’s idea of the imagination than does the famous distinction between primary and secondary imagination that appears only in chapter 13 of the *Biographia*. As early as 1802, Coleridge speaks in a letter of the imagination as “the *modifying* and *co-adunating* Faculty” (*Letters* 2: 866).
6. Recently, Goodson has suggested more specifically that “the ‘deep romantic chasm’ becomes identifiably genital with the appearance of the wailing woman, and it finds its differend in Kubla’s ‘pleasure-dome,’ which assumes a phallic aspect” (418).
7. According to Woodring, “the pleasures of Kubla and his dome, real enough to a utilitarian materialist, are reduced by contrast with the ‘deep delight’ in which the poet, once again inspired, would build the dome and caves of ice imaginatively ‘in air.’ ... Like the baron in *Christabel*, the khan may be a pleasant chap; he is no poet. He sought pleasure; the poet gives delight” (363). I cannot see sufficient evidence in the poem to support Woodring’s contrast between “pleasure” and “delight.”
8. Sgammato offers an interesting gloss on the word “symphony,” suggesting that it refers to a musical instrument, that is, the dulcimer played by the Abyssinian maid (303-06).

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## Criticism: H. R. Rookmaaker (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: "'Kubla Khan' in the Context of Coleridge's Writings Around 1802," *English Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 3, June, 1987, pp. 228-35.

[In the following essay, Rookmaaker proposes that the key to understanding "Kubla Khan" may lie as much in Coleridge's other writing at the time he composed the poem as it does in its sources.]

Although most critics regard 'Kubla Khan' as one of the seminal poems of romanticism, there is sharp critical disagreement about its significance and meaning. While the general outlines of the landscape described in the poem are relatively clear, it offers only little indication concerning the significance of its imagery. The pleasure-dome, for instance, can be interpreted as a symbol of 'the heaven of art' (J. V. Baker), or as embodying finite man's 'desire for pleasure and safety' (R. H. Fogle); again, it could signify 'the pleasure of a sexual union' (G. Wilson Knight), or the individual's 'limited field of consciousness' (P. Magnuson).<sup>1</sup> Though exaggerated, there is some truth in N. Fruman's remark that 'Every interpretation is in an important sense a catalog of the reader's interests'.<sup>2</sup>

In their attempts to solve the riddle of 'Kubla Khan', critics have sought elucidation in its sources, ranging presumably from Ridley's 'Tale of the Genii' to Pausanias's *Description of Greece*, from Southey's 'Thalaba' to Eichhorn's commentary on Revelations.<sup>3</sup> All these sources are conjectural, however, and often yield conflicting evidence. Even sources that are generally accepted have appeared little helpful: Purchas's *Pilgrimage*, for instance, describes a false paradise, Milton's *Paradise Lost* obviously a true one.

An alternative to source criticism would be to approach the poem in the light of Coleridge's contemporaneous poetical and non-poetical writings. But again one is confronted with a difficulty; its date of composition is unknown. The date Coleridge himself supplies in the Preface, summer 1797, is now largely discredited, partly because the Preface has turned out to be misleading also in other respects, partly because Coleridge was never very accurate where autobiographical details are concerned.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of internal evidence, I would suggest that a first draft of the poem was conceived during, or shortly after his trip to Germany in 1799, but that its definitive version was not completed until 1803 or 1804. The internal evidence on which this conjecture is based will be presented in detail in the course of this article; at this point it should suffice to note the general resemblance between the ideas encountered in 'Kubla Khan' and those expressed in 'Dejection: an Ode' (1802) and 'The Picture' (1802). The poet lamenting his inability to recapture the lost vision, the role attributed to joy in this process, and the somewhat deceptive appearance of an optimistic ending are among the features shared by all three poems. Besides, in his Preface Coleridge expressly associates 'Kubla Khan' with 'The Picture'. This hypothetical dating offers the possibility of a new approach to 'Kubla Khan', reading it in the context of Coleridge's position between 1799 and 1804.

### 'KUBLA KHAN' AND THE ROMANTIC FALL MYTH

After his journey to Germany in 1799, Coleridge appears to be strongly influenced by continental thought, especially German idealism. In connection with 'Kubla Khan', one aspect of this tradition, which for brevity's sake I will call the romantic fall myth, is highly relevant. Its general outlines are as follows. It was believed that originally man and nature were one, man being wholly and truly a child of nature. Man's fall was due to his becoming conscious of his individuality which entailed his separation from the unity of all being and thus his alienation from nature which henceforward appeared to him as an outer world of unrelated things. It was the conviction of many German thinkers that the ultimate aim of all human endeavour is to restore this lost unity with nature, to regain this original paradise. Underlying this fall myth is the belief that the same 'divine' life-force is the source of both man's and nature's life. Although after the fall human consciousness is temporarily alienated from the universal life-force, this force nevertheless remains as the sustaining cause of

man's life as well as nature's. This implies that if man is capable of re-establishing unity with the life-force within himself, of which he has become 'unconscious' after his fall, he likewise restores his unity with the life-force operative in nature, and thus regains his original, paradisaal state.<sup>5</sup> This romantic fall myth, which has antecedents in the Neoplatonic and gnostic traditions, was very popular in Germany around 1800; in one version or another it can be found in the works of Kant, Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel, to name only a few thinkers in whom Coleridge was interested during various stages of his career.<sup>6</sup>

Coleridge's substantial acceptance of this myth may be deduced from various passages in his letters and notebooks. In a letter of January 1803 he describes his experiences as he climbs a mountain,<sup>7</sup>

The farther I ascend from animated Nature, from men, and cattle, & the common birds of the woods, & fields, the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life; Life seems to me then a universal spirit, that neither has, nor can have an opposite. God is every where, I have exclaimed, & works every where; & where is there *room* for Death?

The farther Coleridge is removed from the world of separate phenomena, the more he is aware of the all-pervading, universal spirit, or feeling, of life, the ground of all being. He is afforded, as it were, a momentary experience of paradise in which death has ceased to exist, since death implies merely a return to the unconscious life of nature.

In 'Hymn before Sunrise' Coleridge associates these moments of heightened vision with a state of semi-consciousness,

O dread and silent Mount! I gazed upon thee,  
Till thou, still present to my bodily eye,  
Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer  
I worshipped the invisible alone.  
Yet thou meantime wast working on my soul,  
E'en like some deep enchanting melody.  
But I awake, and with a busier mind,  
And active will self-conscious, offer now  
Not as before, involuntary pray'r  
And passive adoration!

(lines 13-22; 1802 version)

After consciousness has returned, nature regains its 'outness', and the recollection of the vision of unity can only elicit 'passive adoration'. It is noteworthy that in his Preface to 'Kubla Khan' Coleridge similarly relates his vision of Kubla's paradise to a state of semi-consciousness; he informs the reader that the poem was written 'in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses' during which 'all the images rose up before him ... without any sensation or consciousness of effort'. Thus it is likely that 'Kubla Khan' describes a similar vision of unity with the underlying life-force.

'Alph, the sacred river' seems an appropriate image of the divine life-force operative in man: it emerges out of the earth, out of the unconscious regions of the human mind, and after running five miles above ground, signifying the visionary moment of human contact with the life-force, disappears 'Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea', back to the area beyond human consciousness. If read in this way, 'Kubla Khan' offers a symbolic representation of the brief moment of vision when with 'the deep power of Joy, / We see into the life of Things'.<sup>8</sup> The disappearance of the river indicates the end of the vision, when man is again confronted with the 'inanimate cold world' of external phenomena, with the world as a 'lifeless ocean'.



In 'Dejection: an Ode' Coleridge describes Joy as being intimately connected with the paradisaical experience of the life-force; it is no less than

Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,  
Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,  
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower  
A new Earth and new Heaven

(lines 66-69).

In short, Joy could be regarded as the concrete, psychological manifestation of the felt unity of all life.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in the centre of Kubla's vision is the *pleasure-dome*. No matter how intense this joy, however, man is afforded only a momentary, finite vision of the infinite: the paradise is enclosed and its walls are, appropriately, exactly as long as the distance which the river runs above ground ('twice five miles' probably means five square miles). In this brief moment of Joy, then, man is given a foretaste of his ultimate return to paradise.

While the first part of 'Kubla Khan' (lines 1-11) is pervaded by an air of order and tranquillity, the following part (lines 12-30) is wild and tumultuous, suggesting a world in the throes of creation. Some elements in this section are extremely puzzling. In general terms, it describes the deep recesses, the 'deep romantic chasm', of the human mind from which the unconscious life-force wells up. The tempestuous, almost destructive violence of the fountain, the source of the river, could partly be explained by the fact that here man comes into contact with a superhuman power far greater than he, partly as a symbolic description of the overpowering Joy, 'the gladness of Joy', man feels in moments of supreme vision, as is suggested by a Notebook entry of November 1804,<sup>10</sup>

I am never happy, never deeply gladdened—I know not, I have forgotten what the *Joy* is of which the Heart is full as of a deep & quiet fountain overflowing insensibly, or the gladness of Joy, when the fountain overflows ebullient.

Again, the wailing woman could, in Neoplatonic terms, be accounted for as the human soul longing to return to the One, or at least to reach the stage of demons, creatures living in closer proximity to the One. Finally, the 'ancestral voices prophesying war' articulate man's awareness, based on age-old experience, of the precarious and temporary character of the vision. Yet, while probably valid in general terms, such a gloss skims over the surface of the poem rather too smoothly.

At the risk of appearing sententious, I wish to recall an earlier version of the romantic fall myth, prevalent in Neoplatonic and gnostic circles, in an attempt to do fuller justice to the poem. This anterior version of the myth must have been known to Coleridge: it is found in the works of Jacob Boehme (Behmen) as well as in John Scotus Erigena's *De Divisione Naturae*; to both of these there are references in Notebook entries around 1802.<sup>11</sup> Also in the works of the Cambridge Platonists allusions to this very old tradition are encountered.<sup>12</sup>

According to this Neoplatonic version of the myth man was originally created as a self-regenerating, undivided, androgynous being comprising both male and female parts. As C. Manusov describes it, 'At the moment that Adam longed for an earthly wife, this unity was lost and the so-called "matrix" was separated from him. Also he lost his fire of love. The new and changed man has succeeded in regaining this lost unity by allying himself with the heavenly Sophia', thus becoming an androgyne again.<sup>13</sup> In his commentary on Aristophanes' myth of the original androgyne as presented in Plato's *Symposium* Ficino further identifies this lost aspect of man as the supernatural light; men, he notes, strive to win back 'that divine supernatural light, that former half of themselves which they lost in the fall. When this has been won back, they will then be whole and blessed with the vision of God'.<sup>14</sup> In terms of this version of the myth, an experience of the divine

life-force would be accompanied with the emergence of the lost female part of man, while a vision of the paradisaal unity of all being would imply a temporary reunion of man with the lost female.

Two puzzling elements in 'Kubla Khan' could be explained on the basis of this myth. Firstly, the woman appearing at the source of the river, 'wailing' to be reunited with her 'demon lover', could be regarded as the heavenly Sophia, ever present in the unconscious regions of the human mind, longing for a reunion with her lost male part. If such a reunion of male and female could be permanently established, it would mean that man becomes a paradisaal being again, no longer caught in the prison of his fallen earthly state, and that man could start journeying back to his Maker through the different worlds intermediate between earth and the One, the first of these being the world of demons. Secondly, it could explain Coleridge's use of explicit, sexual imagery in his description of the fountain. Since a return to paradise, however visionary and temporary, implies a reunion of male and female, the imagery suggesting coition and ejaculation would not be inappropriate, also because this coition leads up to the 'birth' of the 'new Earth and new Heaven' temporarily beheld in the vision of the dome. One could recognize a pun on 'momently' (line 24) in this connection; besides meaning 'recurring at short intervals' (cf. 'in fast thick pants', 'half-intermitted'),<sup>15</sup> it could also be read as 'momentarily', that is as long as ejaculation and coition, hence sexual union of male and female, last. Some confirmation of this rather fanciful interpretation of the 'wailing woman' might be that her appearance is associated with the moon which in Behmeian lore is the sign of both supernatural love and the heavenly Sophia.<sup>16</sup> If one wanted to, one could even press further and surmise an autobiographical dimension: in the verse-letter version of the Dejection Ode Coleridge regards his forced separation from Sara Hutchinson as a major cause of the suspension of his imagination, so that perhaps she had come to represent to him a physical embodiment of the heavenly Sophia.

It is not impossible that the lost female returns in the last section of the poem in the guise of the 'Abyssinian maid', Abyssinia being traditionally associated with paradise. If the poet were able to re-establish contact with the paradisaal maiden, he would be whole again and recover the paradisaal vision and the 'deep delight' attendant on this, which he could subsequently express in poetry.

### **COLERIDGE'S VIEW OF POETIC CREATION AND THE PREFACE OF 'KUBLA KHAN'**

It is usually assumed that the Preface of 'Kubla Khan' was written around 1815, shortly before the publication of the poem. Since the Preface is thematically closely related to 'Dejection: an Ode' and 'The Picture', however, it is likely that the 'story' presented in it was conceived more or less contemporaneously with the poem, somewhere between 1802 and 1804. In order to show this, a brief discussion of the Dejection Ode and 'The Picture' is inevitable.

The view of poetic creation implicit in 'Kubla Khan' is treated in detail in the Dejection Ode. In the latter poem Coleridge draws a distinction between the 'inanimate cold world allowed / To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd' (lines 51-52) and the world of poetic vision, the 'new Earth and new Heaven' (line 69), seen by 'the pure, and in their purest hour' (line 65) when instigated by Joy they imbue nature with life. One of the consequences of this view of poetic creation is that the relation between poetry and reality becomes problematic: poetry is concerned with a heightened vision of 'reality' different from the everyday world of most people. Since the average person experiences the visionary world of poetry as alien and strange, his reaction would be one of distrust, unbelief and dread, as is also suggested in the last lines of 'Kubla Khan'.

Also the poet, however, is only afforded momentary glimpses of this higher world: only when he is filled with Joy, 'that beautiful and beauty-making power' (line 63), is he capable of apprehending the life of nature. This implies that the poetic vision is based on a subjective feeling, as is candidly recognized in the ode,

Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—  
We in ourselves rejoice!

(lines 71-72)

Whether the cloud appears luminous or not, whether nature is beautiful or not, depends wholly on the poet's state of feeling. Thus a wedge is driven between nature as represented in poetry and external reality: it is not at all certain if the poetic vision, a reflection of the poet's state of feeling, corresponds in any way to the 'reality of nature'. Poetry, then, is removed out of the area of truth and reality, and must be seen as an expression of the subjective (dream) world of the poet.

In 'The Picture' Coleridge carries this theme even further. Here the protagonist's view of reality is determined by his 'master-passion', his strong feelings of love. Although he tries to resist his inner projective urge in a desperate attempt to cling to reality as he *knows* it to be, the 'master-passion' time and again interferes and he sees in nature nothing but the phantom world created by his passion. Thus he fancies he 'sees' a poor youth, clearly a projection of himself, who torn by his feelings of love thinks he sees the reflection of his beloved in the pool (lines 68-111). Neither the girl, nor the lover are actually there, they only exist in the dream world of the protagonist. Thus the girl, the ultimate centre of the vision, is three stages removed from reality: in the dream world of the protagonist (stage 1), a lover sees a phantom girl (stage 2) indirectly, as a reflection in the pool (stage 3). From the ironic playfulness of this passage it appears that Coleridge was fully aware of the solipsistic implications of his subjective view of poetic creation.<sup>17</sup>

It is certainly no coincidence that in the Preface of 'Kubla Khan' Coleridge refers specifically to this 'dream' quoting the ten lines which describe the imaginary lover's loss of vision. In fact, the situation built up in 'Kubla Khan' and its Preface curiously resembles the one in 'The Picture'. Just as the fictional 'I' of the latter poem wanders through the woods dreaming his visions, so the (fictional?) 'Author' sleeps at a lonely farmhouse on Exmoor after reading Purchas's *Pilgrimage* (clearly a fictional detail: for the sheer size and rarity of the volume this would be virtually impossible in 'reality') where he similarly dreams his vision. Again, in this dream the poet sees a protagonist (Kubla, corresponding to the lover in 'The Picture', both probably dream projections of their respective 'authors') who creates his own vision: the pleasure-dome corresponding to the beloved in 'The Picture'. The subtitle of the poem, 'A Vision in a Dream', clearly emphasizes the significance of the correspondence between the two situations. On the basis of this evidence, it is likely that the Preface should not be regarded as a factual statement but as an integral part of the fictional world of the poem.<sup>18</sup>

In the poem itself the precariousness of the poetic vision is already hinted at. Contact with the river is restricted to a distance of five miles, after which the 'sunless sea' of everyday existence reasserts itself and only recollection remains. Similarly, the fact that Kubla's paradise is enclosed within walls indicates its partial and temporary character. Then there are the 'ancestral voices prophesying war', or the destruction of paradise. Again, describing the vision as 'a miracle of rare device' does not only betoken its unique beauty, but also its rare occurrence. Moreover, the relation between the dome as the centre of the vision and the river, its sustaining cause, remains strangely elusive, one of substance and shadow,

The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves

(lines 31-32).

Finally, the description of the vision seems to end on a dissonant in the line 'A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice'. In Coleridge's work 'ice' usually suggests lifelessness<sup>19</sup> and thus the 'caves of ice' may very well indicate that already during the brief moment of vision, its beauty and Joy are challenged and to some extent diminished by an awareness of its inevitable disappearance. This poem, which already seems to lament the passing away of the vision in its description of the visionary experience itself, is preceded by a Preface which sheds doubt on the validity of the experience. It is denounced as a 'psychological curiosity' and the

reference to 'The Picture' implies that possibly the whole vision is merely a pretty delusion, a dream of a better world devoid of any truth or 'reality'.

'Kubla Khan', then, celebrates the beauty and joy of the poetic vision of the all-embracing, paradisaical unity of man and nature, while at the same time it voices doubts concerning its viability and ultimate validity. This ambiguous attitude to poetic insight is characteristic of Coleridge's position during the period under consideration, and probably a major cause of his subsequent turn to metaphysics.

All interpretations of 'Kubla Khan' are to some extent conjectural and there always remains ample room for doubt and disagreement. The reading proposed here is no exception. Nevertheless, this consideration of the poem in the light of Coleridge's position around 1802 has shown, I hope, that his beliefs and interests of this period are reflected in the poem and that the fundamental problems he was struggling with in those years are thematically closely related to 'Kubla Khan'. As such, it could be regarded as the epitome of Coleridge's position of this period, expressing in enigmatic language his most basic convictions and doubts.

### Notes

1. See J. V. Baker, *The Sacred River* (Louisiana, 1957), p. 18; R. H. Fogle, *The Permanent Pleasure* (Athens, 1974), p. 46; G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome* (London, 1941), p. 95; P. Magnuson, *Coleridge's Nightmare Poetry* (Charlottesville, 1974), p. 42.
2. N. Fruman, *Coleridge, The Damaged Archangel* (London, 1972), p. 395; Fruman related the poem to an incestuous dream.
3. These sources are suggested in J. Beer, 'Coleridge and Poetry' in R. L. Brett, ed., *S. T. Coleridge* (London, 1971), pp. 64-6; P. M. Adair, *The Waking Dream* (London, 1967), p. 113; E. Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Khan* (New York, 1970; first publ. 1953), pp. 136ff.; E. S. Shaffer, 'Kubla Khan' and *The Fall of Jerusalem* (London, 1975), passim.
4. The date of 'Kubla Khan' is discussed in detail by E. Schneider, *op. cit.*; N. Fruman, *op. cit.*, discusses at length Coleridge's autobiographical inaccuracies; I have briefly discussed the date of 'Kubla Khan' in H. R. Rookmaaker Jr., *Towards a Romantic Conception of Nature* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 147-8.
5. A good account of this romantic myth is found in A. Béguin, *L'Âme Romantique et le Rêve* (Paris, 1939), ch. V, centering on the period around 1820; cf. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971), passim.
6. See, e.g., J. Engell, *The Creative Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), esp. ch. 20 and H. R. Rookmaaker, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-115.
7. E. L. Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of S. T. Coleridge* (London, 1956 etc.) (CL), II, p. 916; cf. K. Coburn, ed., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1957 etc.) (CN), I, 921, 1561.
8. In CN, I, 921 Coleridge relates these lines from 'Tintern Abbey' to an experience of the unity of man and nature.
9. See H. R. Rookmaaker, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-140.
10. CN, II, 2279.
11. CN, I, 1000, 1369, 1382.
12. Coleridge borrowed R. Cudworth's *True Intellectual System* from Bristol Library before his journey to Germany, see G. Whalley, 'The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge, 1793-8', *Library*, 4 (Sept. 1949), pp. 114-131; H. More is mentioned in CN, I, 938.
13. C. Manusov, *Pelgrims en Profeten* (Utrecht, 1985), pp. 61-2. (my translation); ch. III of her study deals with the androgyne myth; cf. M. H. Abrams, *op. cit.*, pp. 154ff.
14. Quoted in C. Manusov, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-3.
15. E. Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
16. C. Manusov, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

17. I have discussed these aspects of 'Dejection: an Ode' and 'The Picture' at greater length in H. R. Rookmaaker, *op. cit.*, ch. IX and XI.
18. The suggestion that the Preface presents a fictional account is found (though not extensively argued) in L. Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca/London, 1978), p. 30 and A. K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass./London, 1980), pp. 157-8.
19. See, e.g., L. Patton and P. Mann, eds., *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion* (London, 1971), p. 92n.

## Criticism: Regina Hewitt (essay date 1988)

SOURCE: "The False Poets in 'Kubla Khan,'" *English Language Notes*, Vol. 26, No. 2, December, 1988, pp. 48-55.

[In the following essay, Hewitt suggests that "Kubla Khan" was Coleridge's attempt at evaluating established ideas of poetic creation and ultimately finding them wanting.]

Readers choosing to understand "Kubla Khan" as a comment on poetry may deem most concomitant interpretive issues settled some time ago by George Watson:

"Kubla Khan," then, is not just about poetry: it is about two kinds of poem. We have one of them in the first thirty-six lines of the poem; and though we do not have the other, we are told what it would do to the reader and what it would do to the poet. The reader would be able to visualize a palace and park he had never seen; and the poet would behave after the classic manner of poets, like a madman. This second poem—the poem that does not exist—is so evidently the real thing that it is clear that the poem we have, in ll. 1-36, is not the real thing—not quite a poem at all, in Coleridge's terms.<sup>1</sup>

Watson's argument has a certain finality that implies that further speculation would be useful only if it shifts its focus, and such a shift is indeed evidenced in more recent criticism of "Kubla Khan," which concentrates on its political dimension, celebrates the poetics of the fragment, or traces the Hellenic and Hebraic sources for the views on inspiration the poem displays.<sup>2</sup> Investigating the nature of inspiration, however, inevitably suggests investigating the nature of poetry. So it would seem that criticism of "Kubla Khan" has come full circle during the last two decades and now requires a revaluation of the argument for poetry.

Such a reconsideration may find that "Kubla Khan" is not only about poetry but about the poet who creates it and, specifically, about how he creates it. "Kubla Khan" consists of two successive sections that parallel each other in subject matter. The first part (1-36) deals with the manufacture of poetry through skilled, rational craftsmanship; the second (37-54), with the generation of poetry through artless, irrational inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Each section contains a problem that shows its approach to poetry to be inadequate, its poet figure false. Hence, the poem as a whole displays a dilemma: it shows that the two extant theories accounting for poetic composition fail to provide a sufficient explanation of that phenomenon. By implication, it calls for a new theory of poetic creation. Although it does not suggest what that theory should be and does not present a figure of a true poet, it contributes to the formulation of new theories and new symbols by pointing out the pitfalls fresh thought must avoid. In essence, "Kubla Khan" shows Coleridge weighing the merits of inherited ideas of poetic creation, finding them wanting, and leaving a space for a new idea to fill. A closer look at "Kubla Khan" may make this reading of the poem more readily apparent.

As Watson notes, the first thirty-six lines of "Kubla Khan" may be assigned a historical referent. They are emblematic of Neo-classical or Augustan poetic theory with its prescriptions and proscriptions. The Khan, as Neoclassical poet, brings his work into existence by "decree" and refines it by system and measure ("So twice

five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers were girdled round").<sup>4</sup> The architectural metaphor reduces the poem to the status of any ordinary object put together piece-by-piece according to an exact blueprint. The Khan's plans, however, cannot account for all aspects of the natural environment in which his construction occurs. The "twice five miles" fail to incorporate the chasm and the river, which violate the enclosure:

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)

The river escapes the Khan's confines, reaching the caverns—themselves measureless—and the ocean—obviously illimitable, especially within "twice five miles," no matter how one construes the geometry of that figure.

The Khan's method results in an illusory order, a shaky structure on the brink of overthrow by the elements it could momentarily ignore but not permanently exclude. The first section draws to a close by adumbrating the destruction of the Khan's little world: it addresses "ancestral voices prophesying war," and it shifts its focus from the pleasure-dome to the *shadow* of the pleasure-dome appearing on waves, waves to which the excluded river and fountain have contributed and which can, by a bit of agitation, break up the mere illusion reflected on them. Following from the architectural vehicle, the tenor of the metaphor indicates the unstable and incomplete nature of a Neo-classicism that tries to exclude structural and thematic elements inconvenient to its limited design. It implies that the poet must take into account all parts of the organic, natural order, for these elements belong in poetry and will surface there despite all rules to the contrary.<sup>5</sup>

Juxtaposed to the flawed Neoclassical view of poetic creation is a second different but still flawed view—the ancient fury of the poet shown in the last eighteen lines of "Kubla Khan." This poet, with his "flashing eyes" and "floating hair," portrays—possibly even parodies—the "enthused" poet that Plato condemned. This poet's own mind and judgment have been usurped by some spirit. The poet becomes the passive instrument through which the spirit expresses itself in a way that may or may not be intelligible. Watson notes the analogue, of course.<sup>6</sup> But he privileges it as if it were the view of the poet that Coleridge prefers, whereas "Kubla Khan" makes this figure suspect. He believes himself to have received some extraordinary vision ("A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw"). He was passive at the time and continues passive to the extent that he cannot recollect the experience sufficiently to write anything about it:

Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air. ...

His is "the poem that does not exist" because it cannot and should not. His is a private ecstasy. It results from an esoteric fantasy and not from an insight into nature. Failing at poetic creation, this poet falls back on the exaggerated affectations of "irritable" genius, relishing his ability to mystify others ("And all should cry, Beware! Beware!") instead of welcoming a chance to convey his insight to them (as a true poet would).

It seems, perhaps, odd to reject both figures of the poet in "Kubla Khan." After all, finding a "Romantic" poet critical of Neoclassicism constitutes almost a stock response, but finding him critical of inspiration disturbs

some standard assumptions. A glance at Coleridge's attitude toward the figure of the poet as he expresses it in some of his prose works may help to justify the second rejection. The bulk of his writings show an unqualifiedly positive valuation of the possessed poet to be inconsistent with his statements about the nature of poetic genius.

Most of Coleridge's reflections on this matter occur in works of a later date than the time at which "Kubla Khan" is alleged to have been written. *The Watchman*, however, provides at least one example from the later 1790s of what Coleridge then considered an acceptable figure of a poet. Of Louis de Boissy, Coleridge writes in his essay for Thursday, May 5, 1796:

Boissy, the author of several dramatic pieces, that were acted with applause, met with the usual fate of those men, whom the very genius, that fits them to be authors, incapacitates for successful authorship.—Their productions are too refined for the lower classes, and too sincere for the wealthier ranks of Society. Boissy in addition to great intellectual ability, possessed the virtues of Industry and Temperance; yet his works produced him fame only. He laboured incessantly for uncertain bread.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, Coleridge ranks the poet among men of genius and characterizes those as intelligent, industrious, temperate, and hard-working. Instances of failure are really triumphs, for they stem from an inability to pander to popular taste. While this early essay neither provides a definitive anatomy of genius nor purports to explain how works of genius come into being, it does allow certain attributes to the genius that could not be imputed to a manic bard. Anyone adhering to the Platonic notion of frenzied inspiration would have had a different explanation of Boissy's talents and fate.

Since "Kubla Khan" returned to Coleridge's thoughts at least once later in his career—when he published it, for whatever reason, in 1816—it may not be inappropriate to examine Coleridge's statements in later prose on this question. Coleridge's early description of Boissy as a "man of genius" suggests that further information be sought in the second chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, the chapter on "irritable" genius. With Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Spenser as examples, Coleridge finds that "men of the greatest genius ... appear to have been of calm and tranquil temper," whereas the "counterfeit" genius is characterized by irritability, fanaticism, and morbid sensibility. In the former, passion serves insight; in the latter, "passion [is] in inverse proportion to ... insight." Persons of true genius build on and sustain themselves by a "foundation within their own minds." They control and are not controlled by their insights so that they are characterized above all by their "creative and self-sufficing power."<sup>8</sup>

In "Shakespeare's Judgment Equal to His Genius," Coleridge singles out the Bard as the epitome of true poetic genius and carefully defends him from the Neoclassicists' charges that he was

a delightful monster, wild, indeed, and without taste or judgment, but like the inspired idiot so much venerated in the East, uttering, amid the strangest follies, the sublimest truths.<sup>9</sup>

Had Coleridge subscribed to the "inspired idiot" theory of poetic genius, he would not have found the Neoclassical view of Shakespeare objectionable. He would have endorsed it, holding it up as the proper model for the poet, for it describes someone who creates by the caprice of nature and not by the engagement of his mind. It describes someone in whom passion ranges far from any mental foundation or genuine insight. Coleridge, however, does not welcome such a view. He rejects it as a "dangerous falsehood," and opposes to it his argument that "the judgment of Shakespeare is commensurate with his genius, nay that his genius reveals itself in his judgment, as in its most exalted form"; his essay pleads for the critical discovery of the organization inherent in Shakespeare's works, an organization that takes its pattern from nature (and not from artificial Neoclassical rules) in which every "living body is of necessity an organized one ... [evidencing] the connection of parts in and for a whole, so that each part is at once an end and a means."<sup>10</sup>

It is Shakespeare's ability to make these organic, natural connections that Coleridge most often praises and most often cites to approximate how the imagination works. In "Shakespeare, a Poet Generally," Coleridge argues that Shakespeare's imagination was greatest because it succeeded in "produc[ing] that ultimate end of all human thought and human feeling, unity."<sup>11</sup> Coleridge acknowledges the rarity of such achievement, but never suggests that it is not fully human. In fact, he often repeats "human" and "humanizing" throughout the essay in connection with the operation of Shakespeare's imagination. His emphasis in no way contradicts his famous statement on imagination in Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*, the statement in which he establishes a link between the creative activity of the imagination and the creative activity of God. That statement identifies the authority and precedent for the function of the imagination. Far from suggesting that the operation is aberrant from human activity, it reinforces its appropriateness to it. The appropriateness obtains likewise in the operation of the more specialized secondary imagination, for Coleridge sees the poet's imagination as "co-existing with [his] conscious will," a condition that shows Coleridge to be opposed to the idea of a poet inspired irrespective of his volition.<sup>12</sup>

Coleridge again addresses the "human" aspects of poetry in "On Poesy or Art," writing: "Poetry also is purely human; for all its materials are from the mind ... and all its products are for the mind."<sup>13</sup> His emphasis surely precludes manic "enthusiasm," but perhaps his most definitive rejection of it is to be found in *Anima Poetae*.

Idly talk they who speak of poets as mere indulgers of fancy, imagination, superstition, etc.  
They are the bridlers by delight, the purifiers; they that combine all these with reason and  
order—the true protoplasts—Gods of Love who tame chaos.<sup>14</sup>

Even such a fitful perusal of Coleridge's criticism as is represented above suffices to show that neither figure in "Kubla Khan" possesses the attributes of a true poet. One is a Urizenic type, capable only of weighing and measuring and desirous of forcing his control upon all things; the other is an "indulger of fancy," who can achieve no order at all and who has given up even his self-control to the sway of his visions. Neither is a "bridler by delight." What, then, is the function of the false poets in "Kubla Khan"?

The answer to that question may draw on Harding's recent exploration of inspiration and "Kubla Khan" in which he posits that "tension itself [between two views of inspiration] was Coleridge's real subject in 'Kubla Khan.'"<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, "Kubla Khan" contains the ancient "belief in the possibility that divine truth may be imparted to human minds," as evidenced by the success (albeit temporary) of the Khan's creation; on the other hand, it accommodates the modern "historicist outlook ... that the normative tradition must be the judge of any inspired or oracular utterance," as evidenced by the concluding reflections "of the bard who knows what it is to be possessed, and knows too that this inspired state has escaped him."<sup>16</sup>

Harding's explanation poses a problem similar to Watson's insofar as it makes the will-usurped condition of the inspired poet seem attractive, while Coleridge takes a less wistful attitude toward the manic bard. One may, however, borrow from Harding the key idea of tension and posit a different development. The tension in "Kubla Khan" may be seen as a tension between the extant theories of poetic creation—represented by the false poets—which Coleridge rejects and the new theory of imaginative creation that Coleridge embraces but cannot quite completely work out.

Coleridge turned to the imagination to find the alternative to the theories of poetic creation he had inherited from previous generations and found unsatisfactory. "The poem that does not exist"—but should—is the poem of imaginative creation. To finish that poem, Coleridge would also have to finish the thirteenth chapter of his *Biographia Literaria*.<sup>17</sup> He would have to pronounce how, specifically, the imagination operates so he could display it emblematically and set it forth as the true alternative to the faulty theories of creation. This Coleridge did not do. His insights into the flaws suggested by "Kubla Khan" nevertheless remain with his other monumental contributions to the development of Romantic theories of imaginative poetic creation.



1. George Watson, "The Meaning of 'Kubla Khan,'" *A Review of English Literature* 2 (1961): 21-29.
2. See, respectively, Norman Rudich, "Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': His Anti-Political Vision," *Weapons of Criticism: Marxism in America and the Literary Tradition*, ed. Norman Rudich (Palo Alto; 1976) 215-41; Timothy Bahti, "Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and the Fragment of Romanticism," *Modern Language Notes* 96 (1981): 1035-50; Anthony John Harding, "Inspiration and the Historical Sense in 'Kubla Khan,'" *The Wordsworth Circle* 13 (1982): 3-8.
3. Citations of "Kubla Khan" will be made by line number using the text in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Ernest Hartley Coleridge, ed., 2 vols. (Oxford, 1912) 2: 295-8.
4. Watson, 28-29. Carl R. Woodring, "Coleridge and the Khan," *Essays in Criticism* 9 (1959) 362, points out that the Khan might be best interpreted as other than a figure of a poet. My paper offers the identification of the Khan as a poet as possible within a given set of assumptions and not as inevitable. It deems consideration of that identity as the best of all choices to be beyond its scope.
5. Historically, one might see this "surfacing" begin with the less conventional forms and subjects chosen by such eighteenth century poets as Collins, Cowper, Smart, Chatterton, *et al.* and find its culmination in the *Lyrical Ballads*.
6. Watson, 23-24.
7. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. (London and Princeton, 1969, in progress) 2: 314.
8. Coleridge, *Collected Works* 7.1: 30-47.
9. *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, collected and ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, 2 vols. (London, 1836) 2: 61.
10. Coleridge, *Literary Remains* 2: 63, 65-69.
11. Coleridge, *Literary Remains* 2: 56.
12. Coleridge, *Collected Works* 7.1: 304.
13. Coleridge, *Literary Remains* 1: 218.
14. *Anima Poetae from the Unpublished Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Boston and New York, 1895) 81.
15. Harding, 5.
16. Harding, 5, 7.
17. The story of Byron's encouraging the publication of "Kubla Khan" notwithstanding, perhaps the appearance of this poem around the same time as the *Biographia* indicates that the similar critical concerns of the latter work brought the former back to Coleridge's mind. For a reading of "Kubla Khan" as broadly concerned with imaginative creation, see Fred L. Milne, "Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': A Metaphor for the Creative Process," *South Atlantic Review* 51 (1986): 17-29, who argues that the Khan represents the imagination operating in the mind while the fragmentary nature of the poem makes a cautionary statement about the need to locate imaginative acts within reality.

## Criticism: David Perkins (essay date 1990)

SOURCE: "The Imaginative Vision of *Kubla Khan* On Coleridge's Introductory Note" in *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination: Romanticism and Adam's Dream*, edited by J. Robert Barth and John L. Mahoney, University of Missouri Press, 1990, pp. 97-108.

[In the following essay, Perkins discusses the importance of the introductory note to "Kubla Khan," noting that it guides the reader's interpretation of the work from start to finish.]

Coleridge's introductory note to *Kubla Khan* weaves together two myths with potent imaginative appeal. The myth of the lost poem tells how an inspired work was mysteriously given to the poet and then dispelled

irrecoverably. The nonexistent lines haunt the imagination more than any actual poem could. John Livingston Lowes used to tell his classes, W. Jackson Bate remembers, "If there is any man in the history of literature who should be hanged, drawn, and quartered, it is the man on business from Porlock." He has become, as Elizabeth Schneider remarks, a byword for Philistine intrusion upon genius. Coleridge's self-portrait in the introductory note is another source of fascination, one that anticipates, as Timothy Bahti observes, the image of the poet later propagated by the *symbolistes* and *L'art pour l'art*.<sup>1</sup> The note describes the poet as a solitary, a dreamer, and a reader of curious lore, such as *Purchas His Pilgrimage*. He is not portrayed as a habitual taker of drugs but rather the opposite: an "anodyne" had been prescribed for an illness and had the profound effect the note describes because, as the reader is supposed to infer, Coleridge was not used to the drug. But the motif of being drugged is also part of the *symboliste* myth of the poet. Only to a poet of this kind, withdrawn in dreams and uncertain in his inspiration, could the person from Porlock be a serious intrusion. That the man from Porlock comes "on business" is also typical of the *symboliste* ethos, in which ordinary life and "business" were viewed as antithetical to poetry.

How the introductory note should be printed has not been much discussed, but editors have disagreed in practice. In popular anthologies it may be omitted altogether. If it is, the poem may not be read with the assumption that it is unfinished, particularly when, as is generally done, the editor also deletes Coleridge's 1834 subtitle, "Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment."<sup>2</sup> Since in Romantic poetry "Vision," "Dream," and "Fragment" are practically genres, a reader's experience of the poem must be quite different when the expectations evoked by these terms are not activated.

In many anthologies Coleridge's introduction is printed as a footnote, usually without the first paragraph and the conclusion (the note usually stops at "without the after restoration of the latter," deleting the self-quotation from *The Picture* and the paragraphs that follow it). This editorial decision gives the introductory note less importance and suppresses several of its themes: that Coleridge is reluctant to publish the poem, that he offers it only as a "psychological curiosity," and that he is dependent on involuntary inspiration. After the poem was first "given" to him and then lost, he says in the penultimate paragraph, he could not restore or finish it "for himself," though he frequently tried. When Coleridge's lines from *The Picture* are not included, the theme of lost inspiration loses one of its counterpointing developments.

Or editors may place the note before the poem as an introduction, as Coleridge did. My purpose in this essay is to inquire what difference it makes. The introductory note guides our reading of the poem from start to finish. Without it, most readers would interpret the poem as asserting the power and potential sublimity of the poet, who can be compared to the great Khan. With the introductory note, this assertion is still present, but it is strongly undercut; the poem becomes richer and more complex, and the theme of lost inspiration is much more heavily weighted. Since many critics have stressed that the introductory note apologizes for the poem and minimizes its significance, there is no need to dwell further on these points. Instead, I shall emphasize that the introductory note gives the poem a plot it would not otherwise have, indicates genres to which the poem belongs, and presents images and themes that interrelate with those in the poem.

In previous articles and books, the only critics who have discussed the problems I take up are Irene H. Chayes, Kathleen M. Wheeler, and Jean-Pierre Mileur.<sup>3</sup> For Chayes, the introductory note is a "literary invention" that "serves as an improvised argument" of the poem; it informs the reader that "the unacknowledged point of view" in the first thirty-six lines of the poem "is that of a man asleep, probably dreaming"; and it offers a "general structural parallel" to the poem, since in both the introductory note and the poem "poetic composition of one kind occurs in the past but in some way is imperfect, and poetic composition of another kind is planned for the future but remains unachieved" (pp. 2-4). Wheeler agrees with Chayes that the introductory note is "a highly literary piece of composition" and that it has thematic similarities to the last eighteen lines of the poem. She thinks that the speaker of the introductory note is not to be taken as Coleridge but as a literal-minded and naive persona whom Coleridge creates "as a model to the reader of how not to respond to the poem" (p. 28). Once the reader recognizes himself in the persona, Wheeler argues, he feels a

revulsion and becomes more imaginative and perceptive. Since Coleridge intended all this, his ironic representation of himself in the persona as a “laughingstock” was “a gesture of incalculable generosity” (p. 38). She arrives at this theory because she wants to make the introductory note analogous to the glosses of the *Ancient Mariner*.<sup>4</sup> Mileur also believes that the introductory note is a “self-conscious fiction” with literary quality. It “constitutes an interpretation of the poem” and itself “cries out for interpretation” (p. 26). He makes specific suggestions to which I am indebted, but his interest is less in the relation of the introductory note to the poem than in general issues this relation poses or illustrates—“immanence” and “presence” versus “revision” and “belatedness.”

Complex parallels and contrasts link the introductory note and the poem. There is a sharp difference in scene and tone. The introductory note is realistic, everyday, faintly humorous, and prose, while the poem is romantic, exotic, sublime, and verse. The action of the one is located in contemporary England, between Porlock and Linton, while the other is in ancient China. But they have a similar theme: the character and power (or weakness) of the poet. In the introductory note the poet is a drugged dreamer; his momentary inspiration is dismissed as a psychological anomaly. He takes “pen, ink, and paper” to record his lines, and his poem dissolves when the ordinary world intrudes. In the concluding lines of the poem, however, the poet is an awful figure of supernatural inspiration. His poetry is voiced, spoken rather than written, and imposes itself on the ordinary world, for in the conclusion of the poem the man from Porlock is represented by the poet's auditors (“all”), who are compelled to hear the poet and see his vision. Nevertheless, both the poet of the introductory note and the one of the concluding lines of the poem have lost their inspiration; the difference between them is that the modest, rueful writer of the introductory note scarcely hopes to recover it, while the speaker of the poem imagines himself as possibly doing so and creates a sublime image of himself as poet. We might be tempted to say that the introductory note and the concluding paragraph ironize one another, so that in neither can the representation of the poet's character and relation to the world be read with naive faith.<sup>5</sup> But when brought into contact with Romantic conventions, whatever is expressed in realistic conventions, as is the introductory note, always preempts our sense of truth. Everything about the introductory note—its tone, its description of the poet, the world it portrays—emphasizes by contrast that the poem is Romantic in the sense of unreal.

In his “lonely farm-house” the author of the introductory note may also be compared with Kubla Khan behind his walls; since no other persons are mentioned in the first thirty-six lines of the poem, the reader imagines Kubla as alone. Though it is not unconscious and inspired,<sup>6</sup> Kubla's creativity is similarly effortless; he decrees and the palace is built. Coleridge's reference in the introductory note to “images on the surface of the stream” has reminded some readers of lines 31-32;<sup>7</sup> in these lines the image or “shadow” of the dome of pleasure would similarly be in fragments, since it would be broken by the waves,<sup>8</sup> as also is the image reflected on the stream in *The Picture*. The word *anodyne* sounds a little like “Xanadu,” suggesting that Kubla's palace is located in opium-land.

This brings me to the very interesting quotation in the introductory note from Coleridge's *The Picture*. The introductory note implies that a stone has been thrown into a stream. A youth, who is gazing into the stream, can no longer see the images reflected in it, since they are dispersed by the waves from the stone. The youth is a version of the poet in the introductory note. If we read only the extract from *The Picture* that Coleridge quotes, we cannot know what “lovely forms” are reflected in the stream. In the context of the whole episode in *The Picture*, they are the forms of natural objects along the bank and of a “stately virgin,” who has coyly obliterated the reflection of herself, at which the youth was gazing, by dropping not a stone but blossoms into the stream. Coleridge's theme in this part of *The Picture* is the familiar Romantic one of nympholepsy as expressing attraction to the transcendent and ideal. Like the persons in the concluding paragraph of the poem, who would close their eyes “with holy dread” at sight of the supernaturally inspired poet, the youth hardly dares to look at the maiden directly (“scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes”). His vision of her is lost (“all that phantom-world so fair / Vanishes”), and just as Kubla hears “Ancestral voices prophesying war,” the “fair” vision seen by the youth becomes one of strife, as each of the “thousand circlets” created by the blossoms

falling into the water “mis-shape[s] the other.” But the extract from *The Picture* has a happier trajectory than the introductory note. For in the extract there is a second person, the poet speaker, who is watching or imagining this scene. He comforts the disconsolate youth by reassuring him that the visions will be restored, and in the lines Coleridge quotes they “Come trembling back,” and the pool is again “a mirror.” Reading only the fragment quoted in the introductory note, we would not know that this episode in *The Picture* actually ends with the loss of the vision. In the lines not quoted, the “shadow” of the maiden can no longer be seen after the stream has again smoothed over. She has departed, and thereafter the youth seeks her through the woods in vain, or gazes into “the vacant brook.”

Whether the story Coleridge tells in the introductory note is true has been much debated but makes no difference to my argument. Most critics now doubt that the poem was interrupted by the man from Porlock, that it is a fragment, and that its composition was as involuntary as the introductory note suggests.<sup>9</sup> (On the Crewe manuscript Coleridge noted that it was “composed, in a sort of Reverie.”) However, the state of the argument leaves one free to credit or question Coleridge's story at any of these points, and the main reason for denying that *Kubla Khan* is a fragment is the possibility of interpreting it as a coherent whole. If Coleridge's story is not true—or even if it is—one naturally asks why he told it. The usual answer is that Coleridge was embarrassed by the poem. He had “little confidence” in it (McFarland), wished to defend himself against the charge of obscurity (Yarlott), and was ashamed to publish another fragment (Schneider).<sup>10</sup> He wrote the introductory note to deflect judgment, for we cannot form a critical opinion of a fragment, or if we can, we cannot hold Coleridge responsible for a poem composed in a dream. Beer, Bate, Brisman, Patterson, and others argue that the meaning of the poem made Coleridge uneasy; hence in the introductory note he both abdicated responsibility for the poem and tried to minimize its significance.<sup>11</sup> I shall come back to this point later, but for the moment I shall assume that Coleridge wrote the introductory note for reasons quite different from those that have been suggested. He wished to impose a “plot” upon the poem and to invoke appropriate formal expectations.

Without the introductory note *Kubla Khan* would not have a plot but would consist of two separate passages, the second referring in some lines to the first but not continuing from it. Bate has argued that this structure corresponds to a common one in the greater Romantic lyric, in which the first part, the “odad hymn,” postulates a “challenge, ideal, or prototype that the poet hopes to reach or transcend,” and the “second part, proceeding from that challenge, consists of” a concluding “credo,” a “personal expression of hope or ambition.”<sup>12</sup> Bate cites Keats's *Ode to Psyche* and Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* as examples. In these examples, however, the two parts are much more closely interconnected than in *Kubla Khan*, and Coleridge was strongly committed to the principle that a good poem is organically unified. He could hardly have been pleased with the structure he had created. By writing the introductory note he both explained the structure and converted the poem into the dramatic enactment of a story.

The story told in the introductory note and enacted in the poem is that Coleridge, having taken an “anodyne,” fell asleep while reading *Purchas His Pilgrimage*. In his sleep he composed “from two to three hundred lines.” He remembered them when he awoke, and wrote them down as far as line 30. At this point a person called on business from Porlock and stayed above an hour. When, thereafter, Coleridge tried to continue the poem, he found that “with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images,” he could no longer remember it. He wrote down the “scattered lines and images,” which make up lines 31-36 of the poem, and at some later time composed lines 37-54 as a conclusion. Since the introductory note does not explicitly say that Coleridge appended the “scattered lines” to the ones already set down, a reader could assume that the interruption to the poem, caused by the man from Porlock, comes at line 36. I prefer to locate it at line 31 (“The shadow of the dome of pleasure”) because at that point the continuity breaks and because the poem again seems somewhat discontinuous at line 35 (“It was a miracle of rare device”); thus, to repeat, lines 31-34 and 35-36 can plausibly be viewed as the separate fragments Coleridge could still remember after the visitor from Porlock had left. Wherever the reader locates the interruption, he sees it taking place, but would not see it without the introductory note, which tells him to look for it. *Kubla Khan* is a poem on the Romantic theme

of lost inspiration that represents the loss occurring.<sup>13</sup>

That the final lines (37-54) are not to be read as among those given in the dream is a necessary inference from their content.<sup>14</sup> For otherwise a reader would have to assume that in the very moment when Coleridge was envisioning the Abyssinian maid ("the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the corresponding expressions") he spoke of this vision in the past tense. Such deliberate confusions are expected in John Ashbery but impossible to imagine in earlier poets. The poet would hardly say "In a vision once I saw" while the vision was present to him. Neither would he desire to revive the vision in the midst of it. Hence the reader must assume that lines 37-54 were written at some time subsequent to the dream composition. The longer we suppose they came after the original experience, the more moving their nostalgia and wish, as we imagine Coleridge still remembering the vision and longing to "rebuild" it. Yet, though the final lines are in the subjunctive mood, the grammatical markers of this ("could," "would," "should") disappear after line 49. The reader half forgets that the lines express only a wish and glories in the sublime poet they describe as though he were present. Thus, though in logic and grammar the poem does not conclude positively, for the imagination it ends triumphantly, as though the dome were rebuilt. In this respect the conclusion develops a possibility given in a different tone in the introductory note through Coleridge's self-quotation from *The Picture*, which had promised that the "visions will return" and the "fragments ... unite."

The Abyssinian maid has been the focus of intensive commentary; while nothing in the introductory note, so far as I can see, explains why Coleridge referred to her in particular, the plot to this point makes it plausible that at line 37 the speaker would appeal to some external source of inspiration. For his poem has been interrupted, the vision it reports is lost, and he is unable to revive the vision "for himself." From his store of memory or imagination, therefore, he invokes the Abyssinian maid as a muse. When in line 38 he says that he once saw the Abyssinian maid in "a vision," he refers to a different vision from that reported in lines 1-36 and referred to in the introductory note ("he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision") and in the subtitle, for though a reader might imagine that the vision of the Abyssinian maid was included in the dream, the different associations of Abyssinia and China, Kubla Khan and a singing maiden, suggest otherwise. The formulation of line 38 suggests this also, for if "a vision" referred to the vision just narrated of Kubla Khan's pleasure grounds and dome, it would more appropriately read "the vision," and the word *once* would not be present.<sup>15</sup> To sum up: the introductory note says that the poet lost a vision and the final lines express a wish to rebuild this vision, but in order to rebuild the vision of Kubla's pleasure dome, the poet must first revive a different vision, seen on another occasion, of an Abyssinian maid.

Because of the introductory note, we read *Kubla Khan* as a dream-poem, a genre that appealed strongly in the Romantic period. Among the well-known dream-poems are *The Prelude* 5.70-140, *The Pains of Sleep*, *Darkness*, *The Four Zoas*, and *The Fall of Hyperion*; if we conflate "dream" with "vision" we would add many more, including *The Triumph of Life* and virtually all of Blake.

To say just what readers expected in poems in this genre would be a subject for a book, and I can touch only on some main headings. A dream-poem might be "nonsense" (Lamb's and Hazlitt's term for *Kubla Khan*). But it might be veiled revelation, especially when it was also a "vision." Dreams and visions escaped from realism, predesigned form, orderly sequence, and rational and ethical responsibility and were thus invested with the mystery and wonder also found in primitive myths, folk and fairy tales, and medieval romances. Dreams might embody our secret emotions, and for some Romantic readers dreams might emerge from a reality deeper than ordinary reality, or express a mind within us that is more profound and aware than the conscious mind; dreams might rise from our inmost being where we are one with the all. If, as several commentators assume, Coleridge wished in the introductory note to minimize the import of *Kubla Khan*, to describe it as a dream was not an effective method.

Among the formal characteristics of dreams, and hence of dream-poems, was their concreteness. Except when a character in the dream spoke, a dream was made up of images, and a dream-poem lacked discursive language. The images might be peculiarly vivid. This was prized, and the more so when the images were glamorous or exotic. The poetic effusion of Perdita Robinson on *Kubla Khan* suggests that she found no meaning in the images but was thrilled by them and that they set off similar, supplementary images in her mind. The sequence of dream imagery might be explained by laws of association; moreover, in dreaming such functions of the mind as the external senses, the reason, or the will might be suspended, making dreams more purely associational than the activity of the mind when awake. Or, in another theory, the imagery of dreams was not produced by association but expressed and varied with the emotional state of the dreamer. According to G. H. von Schubert's *Symbolik des Traumes* (1814), the images of a dream are metaphorical and symbolic; they achieve a rapidity, economy, and wealth of meaning impossible to words. A few strangely ordered images in a dream can express what it would take hours to say in verbal language.<sup>16</sup> But the images of a dream are not experienced as figurative by the dreamer. For as Coleridge explained in connection with stage illusion, a dreamer does not compare the images presented in the dream with others. Each is literal reality during the instant in which it is present. Obviously the persistently concrete, exotic, immediate, unexplained imagery of *Kubla Khan* would seem dreamlike to a Romantic reader.

In other dream-poems the speaker remembers a dream and reports it; since it took place in the past, the dream, we assume, has been worked over by the poet with the intention of creating a poem. In *Kubla Khan*, according to the introductory note, the words of the poem were part of the dream and were not changed subsequently. That composition was involuntary would have meant to Coleridge that *Kubla Khan* could not be considered a poem in the full sense and would have justified his description of it as a mere “psychological curiosity.” But for many Romantic readers Coleridge's introductory note would have suggested that *Kubla Khan*, as the work of the “poet hidden” within us, in Schubert's phrase, was a greater work than if the conscious mind and will had helped to create it.

What Coleridge conveyed to the reader in calling the poem a “fragment” is more doubtful. It was not, in any case, merely that the poem was incomplete. Of course, Coleridge thus made, as I said, loss of inspiration more emphatically the subject of the poem than it would otherwise have been, and he altered the image of the poet, who became less sublime and more pathetic. But at least in German Romanticism, with which Coleridge was familiar, a “fragment” was a recognized literary form.<sup>17</sup> It was valued because it activated the imagination; in fact, a fragment was more suggestive than the same words would be within a larger work, where the context would necessarily limit their implication. According to the theories of the Schlegel brothers, a fragment preserves the free, ironic stance of its author as a systematic work would not. And for Romantic feeling in general, as McFarland has shown, any existing particular must seem a fragment in relation to the infinite whole. In McFarland's *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* attention is also directed to fragmentation within what we naively consider as wholes. For the Romantic sense of things, as McFarland interprets it, poems, personalities, and lives are inevitably “diasparactive” or torn apart.

The theme of fragmentation runs through *Kubla Khan*. There is the subtitle, and the term *fragment* occurs again in the introductory note; the two to three hundred lines of which the poem originally consisted may or may not have been a fragment; after the person from Porlock has gone, Coleridge can recall only “scattered lines or images”; he quotes (misquotes) a fragment from *Purchas His Pilgrimage* and another from his own poem *The Picture*; in the latter quotation the images in the water are said to shatter into “fragments” and then reunite; in the poem “huge fragments” of rocks are hurled up by a “fountain”; the “shadow of the dome of pleasure” would be broken into fragments by “the waves”; and structurally the poem falls into at least two separate fragments. A fragment, as these items suggest, is torn from something larger, and it brings the larger context to mind. Just as the whole of *Purchas His Pilgrimage* is vaguely invoked by the extract from it, and the entire *The Picture* by the quotation from it, the original “two to three hundred lines” of *Kubla Khan* are shadowed forth by the lines we have, not as something we can read or even guess at, but as something we are tempted to guess at. Moreover, a fragment, as the “huge rocks” remind us, can be sublime in itself. Many of

these references are to actions and describe things becoming fragmented, fragments being hurled forth, and fragments reuniting. Things become fragmented by accident, as in the introductory note, or deliberately, as in *The Picture*, or by the action of irresistible forces and pressures, as with the huge rocks. The two latter suggestions, I suspect, are closer than the introductory note to the truth concerning Coleridge's fragment.

Lowes, who gives a source for almost every image in the poem, did not seek one for the man from Porlock, for he did not consider this famous person as a part of the poem but as real. If, taking the opposite point of view, we ask why the man from Porlock came, answers may be: to reestablish everyday, rational consciousness, to end the solitude of the poet and associate him again with ordinary human beings, to turn the poem into a fragment, and to stop a transgression. When Coleridge's mind was "Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone" (to use Wordsworth's great metaphor for the mind of Sir Isaac Newton), his speculations, emotions, and mental imagery might become deeply disturbing to him. The person from Porlock serves the same function in the plot as the mildly reproving glance darted from the eye of Sara in line 49 of *The Eolian Harp*; her glance causes the poet to retract the "dim and unhallowd" speculations he has just been pursuing—"shapings of the unregenerate mind"—and to reestablish solidarity with ordinary, good people, "the family of Christ." The person from Porlock is also somewhat analogous to the "goodly company" with which the Ancient Mariner, at the end of the poem, would wish to walk to church, and he has affinities with the friend, in chapter 13 of the *Biographia Literaria*, who has read Coleridge's chapter on the imagination and advises him not to publish it.<sup>18</sup> Many critics have suggested what transgression was imminent in the poem. It had to do with the vision of poetry and the poet as rivaling the creative power of God and/or of the demonic.

### **THE INTRODUCTORY NOTE**

The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity [Lord Byron], and, as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits.

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in "Purchas's Pilgrimage": "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall." The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!

Then all the charm

Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair  
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,  
And each mis-shape[s] the other. Stay awhile,  
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes—  
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon  
The visions will return! And lo, he stays,

And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms  
 Come trembling back, unite, and now once more  
 The pool becomes a mirror.

[*The Picture; or, the Lover's Resolution*, lines 91-100]

Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him. t the to-morrow is yet to come.

As a contrast to this vision, I have annexed a fragment of a very different character, describing with equal fidelity the dream of pain and disease ["The Pains of Sleep"].

#### Notes

1. Timothy Bahti, "Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and the Fragment of Romanticism," *Modern Language Notes* 96:5 (December 1981): 1037.
2. In the earlier printings of 1816, 1828, and 1829 the subtitle was "Kubla Khan; or, a Vision in a Dream," and the introductory note was entitled "Of the Fragment of Kubla Khan."
3. Irene H. Chayes, "'Kubla Khan' and the Creative Process," *Studies in Romanticism* 6:1 (Autumn 1966): 1-4; Kathleen M. Wheeler, *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 17-41; Jean-Pierre Mileur, *Vision and Revision: Coleridge's Art of Immanence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 24-33, 80-88.
4. Mileur, *Vision and Revision*, 66, and Warren Stevenson, *Divine Analogy: A Study of the Creative Motif in Blake and Coleridge* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1972) also compare the introductory note with the gloss to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.
5. Mileur, *Vision and Revision*, 24, also notes that the introductory note and the poem each challenge "the other's literality."
6. Though there was a legend, which Coleridge probably knew, that Kubla Khan had envisioned his summer palace in a dream before he built it. See John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930), 358.
7. Bahti, "Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan,'" 1046; Mileur, *Vision and Revision*, 31; and other commentators.
8. This point was suggested to me in conversation by Judson Watson.
9. Some opinions may be cited without giving complete references: Lowes, Abrams, Hanson, Shaffer, and Piper accept that the poem was produced much as the introductory note says; Schneider, Ober, Watson, Mackenzie, and Stevenson doubt that its composition was involuntary. Schneider thinks it is a fragment; House, Bate, Beer, Bloom, and McFarland deny this.
10. Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 225; Geoffrey Yarlott, *Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid* (London: Methuen, 1967), 128; Elizabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 27.
11. John Beer, "Coleridge and Poetry: I. Poems of the Supernatural," in *S. T. Coleridge*, ed. R. L. Brett (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1971), 66-69; Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 82-84; Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 26-28; Charles I. Patterson, "The Daemonic in *Kubla Khan*: Toward Interpretation," *PMLA [Publications of the Modern Language Association of America]* 89 (1974): 1039.
12. Bate, *Coleridge*, 78.
13. Donald Pierce, "'Kubla Khan' in Context," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 21:4 (Autumn 1981): 581, points out that *Kubla Khan* is "a poem about suspended powers. The unfinishedness of 'Kubla Khan' is integral to the theme."
14. Most persons who have written about the poem seem to assume this, but I have found in conversation that many Coleridgeans do not. Hence I make the point explicitly.



15. David Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 92, points out that “the ‘once I saw’ (l. 38) seems to invoke a time outside of and prior to the vision of Xanadu.”
16. G. H. von Schubert, *Symbolik des Traumes*, 3d ed. (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1840), 6. Drawing his notions of the formal characteristics of dreams and dream poems from Freud, John Beer remarks that the poem “has the arbitrariness and reductive economy of much dream work” and “provides a many-faceted example of the ‘over-determination’ that Freud traced in much dream-work” (“The languages of *Kubla Khan*,” in *Coleridge's Imagination*, ed. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], 220, 252). Since I do not know whether or not the poem was actually a dream, but do know that Coleridge wanted it to be read as a dream, I do not compare it with Freudian descriptions of dream form but with the ideas of Coleridge and his contemporaries on this subject.
17. Chayes, “‘Kubla Khan’ and the Creative Process,” 2, remarks, “Among the Romantics, ‘fragment’ sometimes has almost generic meaning.”
18. Mileur, *Vision and Revision*, 14, connects the introductory note with chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*; see also Brisman, *Romantic Origins*, 34.

## Criticism: Kathleen Wheeler (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: “‘Kubla Khan’ and Eighteenth Century Aesthetic Theories,” *Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter, 1991, pp. 15-24.

[In the following essay, Wheeler identifies “Kubla Khan” as a poem that reflected the concerns and interests of its age. The critic contends that by the time Coleridge wrote his poem, many of the ideas, imagery, symbols, and references to Orientalism had, in fact, already been assimilated into the English literary tradition.]

Few poems of classic status in the English literary corpus seem more exotic to the modern reader than “Kubla Khan.” Coleridge's tantalising account of its origins combines with the Oriental imagery to tend to disassociate the poem from its literary tradition. The perhaps surprising conclusion persists however that if ever a poem reflected the concerns and interests of its age, “Kubla Khan” is that poem. Yet the works on sources has acted both to obscure and to reveal the exemplary nature of the poem. For it has located many coincidences of idea, imagery and phrase in travelogues, histories, religious myths, and Oriental literature generally, without emphasising sufficiently (to overcome the strangeness to a modern reader) the extent to which much of this material had already been assimilated into the English literary tradition in the eighteenth century, and already constituted exciting and well-known speculations of the day.

Johnson's *Rasselas* is a work which helps to indicate how commonplace and familiar in English literature Oriental imagery, with its earthly paradises and exotic guests had become. Published in 1759, *Rasselas* won immediate success in the contemporary climate of *Persian Tales* and *Arabian Nights*. Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762) is another of the most obvious and important cases, in spite of its critical, satiric mode, as is Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) which Byron was later to praise unrestrainedly and draw upon extensively. It is also clear that Coleridge unequivocally rejected the moralising “improvements” to the Oriental tale of Addison, Steele, Johnson, Hawkesworth, and Ridley, and he probably would have also have felt the pseudophilosophizing spirit of *Rasselas* and Voltaire's *Zadig* (1749) to be at cross purposes with the Oriental Tale. On the other hand, he would have sympathised with the satires of Walpole and Goldsmith on the author-translators of the numerous pseudo-tales.

For Coleridge's own adept use of prefaces (and glosses) mimics often ironically the technique of authors' and translators' prefaces of many of the collections of Oriental Tales or English adaptations; he also realised how effective these techniques were in intensifying poetic illusion by projecting the origin and authorship of the tale into some distant and unknown time and country, or into some unusual state of mind. He wove a

framework technique into the verse structure of his own poems, either explicitly as in “The Ancient Mariner,” or in the form of a radical change in the narrative perspective, as in stanza iv of “Kubla Khan,” thus imitating the Chinese-box structure of many tales. He thereby drew attention to the role of the story-teller in both poems, as was done so effectively in *Arabian Nights*. He also often made unity of apparently disconnected images an explicit issue, as in the preface to “Kubla Khan.” And he preserved the action of the poems well outside the realm of reality or possibility (as he ironically owned to Mrs. Barbauld<sup>1</sup>). This Coleridgean kind of supernaturalism became moreover the direct mode of displaying imaginative symbol-making, or what we call “figuration” (the production of figures of speech) at its most universally representative, that is, in its form most free from any dogmatic or didactic purposes and consequently effective for instruction in the way appropriate to art, that is by means of delight. Finally, as will be discussed below, Coleridge showed how exotic and even extravagant imagery could be used in the service of that “educt of the imagination,” the symbol, in order to direct the mind, first, towards the idea and the intelligential in and through the use of the sensuous, and, second, towards a self-consciousness about the mind's own processes and nature, which for Coleridge always constituted the genuine *unity* of a work of art.

The exploration of such a “unifying idea” as self-conscious awareness of the importance of figuration, toward which the imagery of “Kubla Khan” leads, can also be considered in the light of the less literary and more theoretical background of the aesthetic controversies raging in the eighteenth century. Dryden, Pope, Locke, Edmund Burke, John Baillie, Johnson and others contributed to the issues which were hotly debated, such as the relative value of painting and poetry, the nature of the sublime, the distinction between copy and imitation, the nature of genius, the analysis of language as literal or inherently metaphorical, and the role of rhetoric and emotion in poetry. This more theoretical direction is best approached by means of a brief excursus into the image of the garden in its eighteenth century context.

In addition to reflecting the interest in travels, foreign (and especially Oriental) cultures, fantastic speculations about the Nile, the cosmos, origins of man, the first language, and mysterious eastern cults of wisdom and religion (all of which were topics popular throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), “Kubla Khan” also explicitly reflects the widespread interest in gardens, and particularly the oriental or “Chinese Garden” whose design was actually imported into the grounds of stately homes throughout England. However strange it may seem to the modern reader or poet, gardening was a subject worthy of discourses and poems by the most eminent writers, and was eagerly read about by an interested reading public. Sir Thomas Browne (one of Coleridge's favourite writers), Sir William Temple, Walpole, and Pope exploited the symbolic significance of the garden as an example of earthly paradise and of culture generally. Nor did Spenser, Sidney, or Milton fail to take advantage of the symbolic ramifications of the garden as a metaphor for civilisation, art and the human soul.

Pope's translation of the “Gardens of Alcinous” is one example of this predilection for gardens as a symbol of earthly paradise and, perhaps, more relevantly for poetry, as a symbol of genius itself as paradise. Shaftesbury had also used the metaphor of a garden to be cultivated as an apt emblem of the cultivation of genius in his “Philosophical Rhapsody” in the Moralistic section of the *Characteristics* (1711). The description of a garden and gardening generally became to readers a familiar metaphor both for genius and for the work of art itself; thus a mimetic level of significance is achieved in “Kubla Khan,” as it is also in “The Garden of Boccaccio” many years later, with garden as surface subject matter, suggesting that the cultivation (and processes) of genius are the metaphorical subject. Coleridge certainly snapped up this traditional relation, making explicit its consequences for a distinction between the work of art as a growing plant and an organic essence, as opposed to the mechanical products which were also flourishing in the eighteenth century. Thus in the *Biographia*, when he described Wordsworth's genius as a deep, rich soil sustaining the growth of a variety of trees, he was drawing upon a long and familiar English tradition.<sup>2</sup>

The organic or “natural” as distinct from the mechanical, or measured object was already explicitly discussed by Sir William Temple in relation to the craze for the “Chinese Garden” in England in the late seventeenth

century. In his work "Upon the Gardens of Epicurus" (1690), Temple commented on the Chinese scorn for English regularity and measurement in both gardening and architecture; his remark is particularly relevant and fitting as a description of "Kubla Khan" as a "literary Chinese Garden:"

The Chinese scorn this English way of planting, and say, a boy that can tell an hundred may plant walks of trees in straight lines, and over against one another, and to what length and extent he pleases. But their greatest reach of imagination is employed in contriving figures where the beauty shall be great and strike the eye, but without an order or disposition of parts that shall be commonly or easily observed.

Addison makes a similar observation in *Spectator* No. 414 (1712), a part of "Pleasures of the Imagination." In this work, Addison makes clear his commitment to the wild, natural garden, a preference which Temple and Shaftesbury had only partially embraced. But by the time of Walpole's and Gray's letters to Richard West in 1739, even the garden, whether wild or geometric, seemed to be left behind in preference for the splendour and sublimity which only nature could afford. In poetry, the complete changeover to the wild natural scene comes in with Thompson's *Seasons* (1726-46); Chatterton and MacPherson's Ossian poems further expressed the new interest.

The movement of "Kubla Khan" from the formal geometric garden of the seventeenth century to the suggestions of a more natural garden towards the end of stanza i ("forests ancient as the hills," and so on), and finally towards the wild and natural scene of stanza ii, seems to chart this gradual change in interest throughout the previous half century and a half. It had of course its symbolic counterpart in the eighteenth century dispute of the nature of genius as dominated by a reasoning, measuring, analytical faculty or, alternatively, guided by a faculty of intuition, which was mysterious and acted according to its own, unknown, internal principles. Thus the garden symbol had its application in a theory of aesthetics as well as in a religious or moral sphere. Artifice was set up against inspiration, conscious against unconscious, and the mechanical against the organic. It was perhaps in the light of these eighteenth century controversies that Wordsworth formulated his theory of a return to natural feeling and the language of the common man.

"Kubla Khan," like Shaftesbury's writings nearly a century earlier, makes it clear that the solution was more complicated than this "return to nature" implied. In "A Philosophical Rhapsody," Shaftesbury had shown that it was necessary to move out from artifice towards nature, and finally into a "higher art" which would combine the two in a sort of poetic or art form which Blake had envisaged when he pointed the way in the 1780's toward a higher innocence. This "higher art" seem to be precisely what stanza iii and iv of "Kubla Khan" are moving towards, as the aesthetic elements of the poem cease to function predominantly as descriptive imagery appealing to the visual senses, and strive to raise the reader, not to a mental visualisation of scenes and natural landscapes or gardens, but to a contemplation of the production of symbols and ideas. For even in the return to nature and natural art of Thompson's poetry, and later in Bowles, Cowper, and to some extent Crabbe and Goldsmith, the "tyranny of the eye," as Blake called it, or analogously, the fault of moralising nature, for which Coleridge criticised Bowles, Johnson and the Augustans generally, was nevertheless still evident in these poets' efforts to liberate themselves from earlier forms. It was in Burns, Chatterton, or Collins that one might hope more readily to find that idea of imagination as stimulating and spiritualizing the senses, and not as a faculty to "paint nature" for the mind's eye. The distinction between such imagination and fancy, or the painting of nature, could be understood in eighteenth century terms as the argument between art as just a copy or a true imitation, of the internal, essential aspects of "reality."

While Addison, Blake, Baillie, the Abbe du Bos, and others were arguing about the virtues of words over painting as representations or descriptions of nature and reality, Coleridge was never under the mistaken impression that the value of poetry was predominantly to "paint" nature and try to rival pictorial art. If anything, poetry was closer to music; but it had its own proper function: namely, to unify the senses and the reason, the concrete and the universal through symbols and metaphors, and to stimulate the imagination to

self-conscious awareness of this its reconciling nature by means of an apprehension of ideas the nature and relations of which were articulated through figuration. The image, however, was a means only, and idolatry or degenerate art if made the end. "Kubla Khan" most explicitly of Coleridge's poems grapples with this transformation of imagery from functioning predominantly as a description of a landscape or natural scene, as stanzas i and ii seem to function, to images functioning symbolically to embody ideas and reveal the nature of genius as is uppermost in stanzas iii and iv.

The garden, then, can be interpreted as a symbol of the controversy about the true nature of the activity of the mind's faculties, and particularly, about genius. Hobbes and Locke has set the terms of the dispute when they insisted that, essentially, the mind could only repeat the external world known to it through the senses. For them, the mind could not create new entities; it could only manipulate and aggregate the already known "atoms" or simple elements of experience. However different Locke's "representative theory of perception" from Hobbes's simple materialism, both still remained within the circle of thinkers who viewed the mind as essentially passive and receptive, even if for Locke the senses did add all of the secondary qualities of experience to a primary real base, with a faculty of understanding manipulating those qualities. Locke seemed to have a corresponding dualistic view of language as, first, built up into complex concepts by aggregations of simple atoms, and second, as containing a base structure and a layer of ornamentation, which included all tropes such as metaphors, similes, and irony, and which obscured the expression of truth by vitiating the pure rigour and directness of the base literal language of rationality. Later, Horne Tooke was to continue this strictly literalist view of language.

The dispute about whether the mind was passive (as Locke and Hobbes essentially maintained, though, of course, their arguments were different) or was active in its construction of experience, forms the basis of a number of related aesthetic arguments. Most relevant to the discussion here are such issues as, first, the nature of genius, second, the relative value of poetry to painting (and subsidiary arguments as to the purposes of poetry as "representational"), third, the dispute about the meaning of imitation as opposed to mere copying, and finally, the role of metaphor in language. All four of these issues can be profitably related to the discussion of the use and developing function of imagery in "Kubla Khan," as it sifts and shapes these aesthetic issues into poetic forms.

To these disputes, solutions anticipating Coleridge's own views had already been suggested by, for example, Dryden, in his "Essay on Dramatic Poetry" (1688). Dryden was one of the earliest opponents of Hobbes's literalist/atomist view of language and mind. He adopted a Platonic idealist view of the mind's role as essentially unifying and creative in its ability to discover the inner principles of natural objects through the combined action of the reason and the senses. The Platonic distinction between imitation and copy was then re-emphasised by Dryden following Sidney's *Defence*; the failure to realise its importance for a theory of art had led to the absurd view of Plato as an enemy of art. Art, Dryden argued (as had Sidney before him in defence of Plato) does not mirror the simple surface of nature (or the mind); it uncovers or discovers internal principles of organisation which constitute genuine knowledge about that nature. Plato had made a similar point in *The Symposium*, when he had had Diotima lead her listener away from love of appearance to love of the ordering mind. The Hobbesian-Lockean view could never account for the discovery of internal structural principles and laws; no amount of adding together surface materials and information could reveal the depth principles or organisation, as long as the dichotomy between the senses as passive and the reason as variously active was maintained.

While Burke and others earlier in the century such as John Dennis contributed to freeing poetry from the representational theory of value and awarding it a rhetorical, emotive view, these contributions had serious and unfortunate consequences for poetry. For they encouraged the already predominant notion that poetry (and art generally) was something irrational, a matter of feeling and passion that had little to do with truth. In saving poetry from an inferior status to painting, Burke had unwittingly placed himself squarely in the Locke tradition, just as it seemed that he was about to elude its confinement through the analysis of the sublime.

The Burkean notion of poetry as valuable primarily for arousing the feelings was also being challenged by other eighteenth century theorists in the form of a theory of metaphor and its role in language. Hobbes, Locke, Thomas Spratt, Isaac Watts and many others had insisted that metaphors and all poetic tropes were mere fanciful ornamentation to a logical, rational language which had a literal base. According to them, this literal base was the language of science and truth. Ornamentation, while pleasing and gratifying, tended to lead the mind into error by distancing it from the firm, factual basis needed for knowledge. Other theorists, however, such as Vico in *Scienza Nuova* (1725) and Thomas Blackwell in *Enquiry into Homer* (1735), began by means of their speculations into the origins and development of language, to view metaphor, and figuration generally, as deeply rooted in, and an inherent part of language. That is, the notion of a literal base was seen as an illusion fostered by the way in which phrases and words once recognised as metaphorical, became so familiar that they were mistaken as literal. Language was not essentially logical, but also rhetorical—logic was a kind of rhetoric. (This is an indirect challenge to the senses-intellect dichotomy, that “barren dualism.”) Such writers as Hugh Blair, in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), basing themselves on the mid-century work of Robert Lowth and others, were maintaining that even if metaphor erupts from passionate feelings, as many earlier theorists had asserted, it can still be understood as essential to all language, not just to emotive or poetic language. For language itself may be to a significant extent a product of *passion*, in the fullest sense of the word. Coleridge clarified the argument by showing that thought and feeling, while distinguishable, were not essentially divisible; the highest language of truth, whether of poetry or philosophy, was a fusion of thought and feeling, expressive of the whole nature of man and of all his faculties. This language of fusion he frequently referred to as the language of passion, of which metaphor was a basic element.<sup>3</sup> Thus, if metaphor and figuration were not just ornamentation, poetry could not be understood as merely pleasing either, or as an ornament of thought. It too could act as a source of knowledge and truth, both about relatively inherent formal properties of language and mind, and as a “picture,” not of course of the “surface” or appearance either of nature or of man (his thought, judgement, emotions and feelings), but rather of genuine principles or formal relations which organise those appearances.

In England, then, it was Coleridge, and later Shelley, who most convincingly brought together these issues into one central focus of the mind as essentially creative in both the related activities of perception (the senses) and of art (the “higher” faculties), and of language as essentially metaphoric, not logical, both in scientific discourse and in poetry. For example, to Coleridge genius was not an aggregative power, nor a power which gained knowledge only by analysing complexities into simples. Distinction and reduction were only the preliminary acts of knowledge. Reassimilation of parts into new wholes and patterns was the more important function of genius. These wholes, in terms of their truth and power, exceeded the mere aggregative sum of parts or analyzable from them. Secondly, the object of none of the arts, not even painting, was explained according to Coleridge by a representational, descriptive, or picture theory of copying the surface of nature or mind. It is hardly surprising that Plato condemned this type of “art” as a third remove from reality. The genuine object of poetry, and of all other art including painting, was for Coleridge (as it was for Plato) ultimately symbolic, in the sense that the external and sensuous are valuable as means towards the intelligential and the ideal. The image must be made to work in the service of the idea. This image/idea distinction was not adequately made by eighteenth century theorists, especially Locke,<sup>4</sup> and upon it could be said to turn the solution to the prominent aesthetic disputes. From Coleridge's clear perception of the necessity for the distinction grew the concept of the *symbol* as that which could embody the relatively universal (the idea) in the individual (the image), or the representative and general in the particular. Too often the image, the means, was mistaken for the idea, the relative end, and the result in religion was idolatry and in poetry degenerate art, in philosophy materialism, and in personal experience selfishness.

Coleridge concluded (consistent with his theory of mind as essentially creative and of art as symbolic in the above sense) that language was inherently metaphorical, and that metaphor was the only vehicle for truth. The notion of a basis of *literal* language of truth *ornamented* by tropes was only another aspect of the delusion of the mind as passive in perception and experience. For Coleridge, all acts of the mind degenerate through custom, habit and familiarity—whether they be language, metaphor, or art—into the literal. The literal (and

logical) is merely the result of the metaphoric no longer perceived as such. Imagination, that faculty reconciling the barren duality of reason (logic) and senses, can, according to Coleridge and to Shelley, renew degenerate, literal language by revealing or reinventing connections which once informed language as metaphor, as figuration, or by creating fresh metaphors and figures, and thereby fresh truth. All knowledge, then, is metaphorical, and articulated by figurative, not literal language.

“Kubla Khan” can be seen to illustrate these solutions of Coleridge's to the eighteenth century aesthetic and philosophic controversies in a very specific way. The enigmatic transition in the poem from stanza ii to stanzas iii and iv, and the relation of stanza iv to the rest of the poem suggest the solutions discussed above by means, first, of a careful transition in the function of the imagery, and second, in the change in narrative technique or perspective. Stanza iii has often been seen as a problematic and disruptive portion of the poem in several ways. For example, it tends to disrupt the otherwise neat Pseudo-(Cowleian) Pindaric Ode form. Stanza i as strophe, ii as antistrophe, and iv as epode answer to the form of the ode, with the turning about and contrasting character of the antistrophe, and with the “after-song,” incantatory nature of the final stanza. Stanza iii is disruptive at other levels, too, of, for example, metre, tantalizing numerological interpretations, and also of imagery. Not only does it introduce new and unassimilated entities, such as the “shadow” and the “rare device,” or even the “mingled measure.” It also disrupts the landscape: the caves and fountain, beginning and end point of the river, are now so close to each other that there is hardly room for the river to meander, however crookedly, for five miles. Like the less obvious uncertainty of the topography of the Khan's garden in stanza i (whether the walls enclose the ancient forest or not, and where the chasm is), image and landscape disruption seem to prevent externalization, that is, the picturing in the mind's eye of a coherent and unproblematic landscape. This disruption of stanza iii, however, and the resulting separateness from the first thirty lines of the poem of the visions of stanzas iii and iv especially, is not disruption without a purpose, nor does it mar the poem. This disruption strives rather to portray the conflicts about the nature of genius, the role of figuration in knowledge, language and poetry as metaphorical, the use of imagery and the purposes of poetic language as representational, emotive, or other, and, finally, the nature of aesthetic unity as aggregative and mechanical or as organic and integral.

Stanza iii has particularly puzzled readers and critics as it introduces new and perplexing imagery into the poem, and departs from the primarily descriptive and landscape imagery of the first thirty lines. Clearly the imagery of lines 1-30 also functions figuratively or metaphorically (symbolically, to use Coleridge's preferred term)<sup>5</sup> as innumerable critics have shown. But the rather new perspective and role of stanza iii is best described as a self-conscious, witty mimesis, or effort to draw the reader's attention to the way in which the language, rhythm, and imagery of lines 1-30 have so far functioned aesthetically. In stanza iii the poet seems openly to play with the techniques of poetic language used unobtrusively in stanzas i and ii: he forges in front of our eyes new and playful images out of the previous materials. Those new elements which arise from the fusion of old material do not genuinely add either to the landscape of the Khan's garden or to the romantic cavern at a surface level. But they do add a new “odic” dimension, insofar as they constitute a “turning about” and a contemplation upon the way in which the images in lines 1-30 ought to function not only representationally, but also as metaphors and figures of speech to enrich the symbolic content of the poem. For these new elements of stanza iii which do not seem to cohere in any important way to the previous imagery, are themselves playful metaphors, wittily instancing the way an image, through the synthesis of oppositions or differences, leads to a metaphoric meaning. They do not indeed work well as representational images, as the images of line 1-30 do (the incoherence of these images has been noticed by numerous critics), but as metaphors, or as examples of the *form* or figuration of metaphor, they are exemplary. They fuse apparently opposite or irreconcilable elements, and show that crucial “similarity in difference,” the classic definition of metaphor. They also show how the image takes on metaphorical significance when its connection with an apparently dissimilar element is discovered.

Two examples of this enriching of the image by the discovery of its metaphorical implications illustrate the mimetic technique of stanza iii. First, the caves and the dome belong to two apparently contrasting worlds in

the poem, one to the world of nature, the other to the world of human culture. By fusing these two in stanza iii, (“sunny pleasure-dome, with caves of ice”) we gain an image which fails as a representation (that is, in no sense is it a convincing natural or “real” unity), but which acts perfectly as a metaphor for the idea that art is a product of the unity of the natural and human. In other appropriate terms, aesthetic productions, true works of art, those “miracles of rare device,” that is, result only from the synthesis of the spontaneous, instinctive impulse with the measuring, conscious planning and decreeing exemplified by the Khan. Thus, a theoretical gesture seems to be made in stanza iii, by means of images which fail at a literal, landscape level, but which mimic the aesthetic processes involved in understanding the previous images by acting as exemplary metaphors of the process of image-making or “figuration”—the process of imagining and creating beautiful figures of speech.

The second example of stanza iii displaying the proper functioning of the imagery of the first thirty lines is the use of the “shadow of the dome of pleasure.” The metaphysical implications of shadow and substance will be discussed later, but here this new image, taken as a model of form, can suggest that each image of the previous lines may have a “shadow” which enriches its content. Unlike the above example, this related shadow-element, this “absence,” may not be presented in the poem explicitly, but might in part at least be derivable from the literary tradition, or from experience generally. Thus the dome might be enriched by sexual connotations. Or the garden might be recognized as a metaphor for the cultivation of genius (perhaps the most important image in the poem with respect to its structural unity). The river might be interpretable as consciousness, life, or language. The chasm might be a metaphor for the subconscious and the unknown, and the fountain and fragments for the production of imagination. All of these shadowy metaphors or traditional associations enrich the poem's imagery, and create issues which the poem as a whole may seek to resolve, or only represent. But the discovery of such relations and their import for questioning the nature of the meaning in poetic language as itself a kind of “absence,” is essential to a greater appreciation of the beauty or unity of the poem. Stanza iii emphasizes precisely this process of the discovery of relations, the synthesis or fusion of different elements into an idea, and the nature of metaphor as opening out to (rather than closing in on) meaning, as allegory does. Many other oppositions in the poem, such as the Khan and the visionary, the visionary and the damsel, nature and culture, garden and wild, and so on, indicate that the poem proceeds in part by the relating of oppositions and the discovery of identities and solutions through these conflicts, whether implicit, as in the second example, or explicit as in the first. Each of the elements of stanza iii presses the importance of opposition, or similarity in difference, as shadow and substance, fountain and cave, and sun and ice, or dome and cave can be seen as oppositions with, nevertheless, essential connections.

The (only relative) “failure” of these images of stanza iii to participate integrally in the rest of the poem (or to be convincing representational or descriptive unities in themselves), serves not only to signify the shift away from the predominant “descriptive” or landscape (18th century) mode of the surface structure of lines 1-30 (whatever the depth symbolism); it serves also to capture a quality inherent in metaphor, namely the apparent “flaw,” the “missing” element, or the apparent “failure” of connection or relation, the gap, fragment, or disunity which is unresolved by the discursive understanding, but which is acceptable and meaningful even in the “flawedness” to the faculty which apprehends relations, whether we call it the imagination, *nous*, intuition, or wit. Wit seems to be the word which many eighteenth century theorists used for this faculty (corresponding to the *Witz* of German aestheticians somewhat later), and it is instructive for grasping the way in which the “flawed” element may function in aesthetic experience. For the essence in wit is to bring two disparate elements into unfamiliar and daring, but not absolute, proximity; for a space is left. In the case of the joke, the listeners must apprehend the missing relation with their own “wit,” or they will “miss” the point. Nothing is so tiresome as to have to explain a joke, if it is even possible to do so, and nothing robs it of its inherent power to delight so much as to have to attempt to explain the meaning.

The images of stanza iii are in large part contrived and unconvincing unities at least at the surface of representational function. But as soon as their function is seen as mimetic of the making of metaphors, they become models of effective stimulation to an awareness of aesthetic techniques. The phrase “miracle of rare

device” may help to emphasize the role of these contrived unities, for it makes claim to a miraculous unity and coherence which is entirely unwarranted in view of the questionable unity of the image of, for example, “a sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice.” Nor does such an image anywhere fit into the previously established landscape and architecture of stanzas i and ii. Indeed it seems to confuse and contradict the layout of the landscape already charted. Thus it fails to function adequately at *this* level. But with respect to its form, it exquisitely displays the structure of metaphor and the design of the poem generally, which relies on structures of opposition both at the level of imagery, rhythm, and stanza, as well as of narrative voice and poetic unity of the whole.

Another of the elements of stanza iii further suggests the changing role of imagery from representation of externals to embodiment of ideas and mimesis of creative figuration, or, rather, the transition of the poem of a new level of mimesis and aesthetic consciousness about the production and function of the images of the previous two stanzas. The phrase, “Mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves,” also makes use of opposition and, in this case, of explicit synthesis, which at first may even seem convincing. This image further theorizes by punning upon the musicality of the poem and its subtle changes in rhythm and assonance in the words “mingled measure,” with its use of four and three-four accent lines against the five accent line of stanza ii. Mimesis at the level of “music” or assonance and accent has been anticipated earlier in the poem, as in line 25, “Five miles meandering with a mazy motion,” or line 20, with the final accent on “forced” and “burst,” or lines 5 and 13 on “down.” It is played upon in line 6 by “twice *five* miles” which described the extent of the garden, and the rhythm then moves into *five* accent lines for lines 7-11. But none of these occurrences function predominantly as mimetic of figuration, as “mingled measure” does in stanza iii. This is once again an illustration of the transition in the poem; *aesthetic* events which occurred in the first two stanzas are now being reflected upon and explicitly exhibited. “Measure” of course also puns as the double meaning of music and also the meaning: “a division of a metrical line in poetry.” The flaw in the image has also been pointed out by critics, however; an inconsistent proximity of fountain and cave is forced, so that the river’s five miles of meandering becomes completely impossible if its origin, the fountain, and its end point, the cave, are as close together as this image suggests. But even if the image is thought to fail as an external representation it delightfully illustrates that element so necessary to wit and figuration, namely the surprising (but not too great!) proximity of two apparently distant or unrelated elements. Spaciousness is also essential. The “mingled measure,” as a result of this unexpected relation, seems to suggest that music and poetry depend upon precisely such metaphoric junctions through apparent disjunction.

Nor indeed is the other synthetic image of the third stanza straightforward. The shadow, a product of the dome and (unmentioned) light on waves, has no apparently significant function in the rest of the poem at the explicit level of representational imagery. It is also unclear how the adverb “midway” should be taken. But the idea of shadow has certain symbolic associations which point to a level of reflection about reality, and about illusion. First, the platonic contrast between the phenomenal and the noumenal world is set up, and lines 1-30 can be partly interpreted as a picture of this phenomenal world. If the River Alph is interpreted as an allegory of consciousness, then the shadow of the dome also invites comparison with the duality of experience, in which the consciousness comes into contact initially, at the surface, only with the “shadow” of the “thing-in-itself.” Shadow—or substance—opposition is also suggestive of the illusion-versus-reality and absence versus presence dichotomy, which intimately involves artistic products. In *Biographia* Chapter Thirteen Coleridge had described the power of this shadow-substance opposition:

In short, what I had supposed substances were thinned away into shadows, while everywhere shadows were deepened into substances: “if substance may be call’d what shadow seem’d, / For each seem’d either!” milton. Yet after all, I could not but repeat the lines which you had quoted from a MS. poem of your own in the friend, and applied to a work of Mr Wordsworth’s though with a few of the words altered:

“—An orphic tale indeed,



A tale obscure of high and passionate thoughts  
To a strange music chaunted!"

(BL [*Biographia*] I xiii 199-200)

The implied exchange of value between shadow and substance reinforces the idea that the metaphors (shadows) implied by the images (substances) of lines 1-30, may be at least as important as the images taken literally: stanza iii has one further significant complication, and that is the ambivalent referent of the pronoun "it" in line 35. The pronoun ought by progression and continuity to refer to the "shadow of the dome of pleasure." But the continuation into line 36 shifts the force of the referent to "A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice." The "miracle of rare device" itself floats between these two images, and the uncertainty as to which is the miracle unifies the shadow with the final image in another daring stroke of identification or synthesis, which seems to confuse at the level of imagery, but which continues the game of mimesis at the level of self-referring poetic commentary. Thus the "miracles of rare device" are metaphors, symbols, and images embodying ideas, as well as whole works of art. Stanza iii has forced us to a recognition of the nature of relationship at the expense of sensible content in poetic tropes. But this is precisely the direction necessary for the gradual transition from representative language and description to symbolic and relational language expressive of ideas, especially the idea of the nature of human creativity as figuration, or the making of figures of speech. And of the idea that figures of speech are meaningful through resonance and expansion of possible relations—by radiation—rather than meaningful only by enclosing or "comprehension." Hence the significance of the notion of the "illuminating" intellect. Shelley's predilection for radiating imagery of Star, flower, song, and light in general, for example, contrasts with the linear mode of the discursive intellect.

The sacrifice of "traditional" content for the purpose of emphasizing relation and, ultimately, ideas and figures is consistent with Coleridge's tireless distinction between the image and the idea and the necessity of always making the senses and images serve something higher than mere descriptive representation.<sup>6</sup> He had sharply criticized Locke in his well-known Locke-Descartes letters for failing to make the distinction, which is crucial to a theory of mind as active and constructive of experience, as opposed to the passive, materialist, or associationist theory. "Kubla Khan" makes the indirect claim, then, that the image divorced from the idea, and correspondingly, poetic language used merely for description, copying, and representation, and not for the embodiment of the intuition, language or figuration, the intellectual relations of thought, the union of thought and feeling, and self-conscious reflection about the nature of creative activity, would mean idolatry and degenerate art, just as the Reason divorced from the senses leads to degenerate philosophizing. "Kubla Khan" depicts precisely and self-consciously the necessity for the image and the senses to work in the service of the idea and the imagination, and vice versa, through the medium of metaphor and symbol. This is not to say, however, that the first thirty lines are merely representational and imagistic. They are not; for they are enriched with innumerable metaphorical implications. But they do not mimetically or *explicitly* illustrate this aspect of language and truth as metaphorical or figurative as stanza iii does. Stanza iii, through its "self-referring" commentary of mimesis, is an account of how the previous 30 lines ought to be enriched and brought to a fullness of meaning by exploring the symbolic figurative possibilities. This is why stanza iii seems to disrupt and even contradict the landscape and architecture of the earlier verse. It marks a turning away to a new dimension of reflection about the processes of figuration which made the previous lines possible and which give them an elegant complexity of meaning which exceeds their surface beauty.

Stanza iv is an advance upon stanza iii, which had acted primarily as a transition to a new mode of expression. First, it daringly introduces completely new elements—the damsel (the Abyssinian maid), the song of Mt Abora, the music, and the wild-eyed youth. The challenge of stanza iv is how to integrate these elements into the structure of the poem. In fact, they will not integrate at the level of imagery, and this failure forces a reorientation of the structure, according to the "directions" or "instructions" of stanza iii. These directions lead the reader, we said earlier, to look upon imagery as functioning in a new way, as symbols working more complexly, and less simply representationally, in the service of ideas than the previous images. The structural

incoherence of stanza iv at the level of naive imagery is, like the previous “flaws” in the imagery in stanza iii, often purposive and not necessarily marring. It shifts the aesthetic action to a level of new significance, which now goes beyond that of stanza iii. For in stanza iii the shift leads to a contemplation of how imagery and other poetic techniques such as musicality can work for the idea *via* symbols and metaphors, and this is essentially a concern for the medium of expression, poetic language. But in stanza iv the concern is no longer only the language and mimetic displays of how metaphors and symbols are made, and their nature, structure, and role. It is now the origins of this language, its agency and production which are being contemplated and indeed displayed in and through that contemplation. That is, the nature of inspiration itself, or imagination, and not only the music or products of imagination which is poetry, are self-consciously contemplated by the visionary Poet. Theoretical gestures are evident, as the poet sets up the elements of this reflection and reveals the extremely problematic nature of their interrelations. That is, in what way is his vision of the maid related to the dome he will build, or to the music which will inspire it? How would a revival become possible: what would be the conditions for it? And how would it be understood by his audience? Whether we allegorically equate the damsel, her song, or the revived music with imagination, or the dome in air with an artifact, such as this poem, the elements of the complex situation of creativity are all there; no strict *allegories* for these various elements are desired to see the metaphor of the poet's (*and reader's*) situation which is being portrayed. In some ways the images of stanza iv may be seen to integrate with those of i and ii by contrast, even at a very literal level. For the visionary and the Khan are related through their respective dome in air and pleasure dome. This suggests the theoretical gesture of contrasting talent with genius, or the measuring and decreeing conscious will of the Khan with the inspiration and visionary Power of the youth. But the youth's success is dependent upon the intermediary figure of the maid, which is beyond his conscious control and will. For Coleridge, the imagination was described precisely as that:

reconciling and mediatory Power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*.

(*Stateman's Manual: Lay Sermons*, 29)

The change of the narrative voice from the distance and omniscience of the first two stanzas, to the uncertain voice of stanza iii, and finally to the clear first-person narrative of iv reflects a metaphor of progression from unconscious creative activity: first, to a contemplation about the products or medium of that activity, namely, figuration, and finally to a consciousness and reflection about the activity itself, its origins and its relation to the ego and the “now.” This self-conscious, detached glance back over, firstly, one's artistic products and, secondly, imaginative activity or agency itself, built into the design of the whole, is precisely the touch which most effectively finishes the poem; ironically, it is also the touch which at a merely surface level of representational or descriptive imagery makes the poem seem disunified and fragmentary. The final word, “Paradise,” illustrates the way in which the poem comes full circle back upon itself, leading back to the man-made paradise-garden of Xanadu. But this paradise in stanza iv, while it may have important religious connections with the garden image of the Khan in stanza i, is also its opposite: for it is the Paradise which is Genius itself, and not a sensible or purely sensuous, fallen world (a world devoid of imagination) as in stanza i. This idea, that paradise is genius itself, and not something existing in space-time, seems to have emerged only at the end of the poem. Yet it was also an aspect of the garden seen metaphorically at the beginning of the poem. For, as we said earlier, the garden image as a metaphor for genius was indeed a familiar “trope” in eighteenth century literature. This familiar metaphor of garden as genius and genius as paradise is one of the most powerful inducements to the interpretation of stanzas iii and iv as mimetic and self-conscious of the process of figuration evident in the first two stanzas. For this discovery at the end of the poem combined with the initial implicit but predominant metaphor of the *garden as genius* at the beginning reveals one of the major unifying themes of the poem, the idea that *genius is paradise*, which the imagery served to elucidate. And it reveals the form of the poem as progressing through differences and oppositions towards similarity,

and finally oneness or unity, both at the level of specific concrete imagery, and at the level of the use of imagery, from descriptive, to metaphorical, and finally to the sensuously imaginative. “Kubla Khan” thus seems to illustrate Coleridge's account of the purpose of all poems and of imagination itself:

to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *straight* Line, assume to our Understanding a *circular* motion the snake with its Tail in its Mouth.

(CL [Collected Letters] iv 545)

To express this idea of *genius as paradise*, no representational imagery is adequate, a point which the poem seems to make by transcending to a new level of aesthetic endeavour from that engaged in stanzas i and ii, or even in stanza iii. For in stanza iv there reigns over the verse a “pure imaginativeness” which occurs nowhere else in the poem, as representative landscape imagery is deliberately sacrificed for the idea of relation and figuration, and not imagery, description or objectification, as paramount to the experience of imagination. Coleridge had spoken of this “pure imaginativeness” which frees the mind from the constraints of space, time and causality (all categories of the discursive understanding) in relation to the *Fairie Queene* and the *Arabian Nights*, as well as to his own “Supernatural Poetry.”<sup>7</sup> He seems to mean by the phrase an atmosphere in which images function most freely in the service of metaphors, symbols, and ideas, with as little descriptive, representational, or externalizing effect as possible. Paradoxically, imagery of this sort seems to be stripped of natural referents, or of context value, and succeeds primarily in creating an unfamiliar atmosphere or effect, as do nearly all of the images of stanza iv. The dulcimer, the adjective “Abyssinian,” the singing about Mount Abora, and even the dome in the air or the final images of milk and honey seem almost exclusively to create an atmosphere of strangeness, removing the reader from the familiar realm of ordinary consciousness into a realm of imaginativeness which knows no bounds. Thus these images can be tremendously effective without any source-work or any awareness of their connections with the world of geography, history, religion, or other areas. The predominant function of these images is as symbols of aesthetic processes and faculties, which were also a concern of stanza i and ii, but only at an indirect level. Thus dogmatic or overt moralizing inhibits the free play of imagination, as does any other form of allegorizing.<sup>8</sup>

If “Kubla Khan” had ended at line 30 or had had no preface, it might have seemed more superficially organized and unified, but it would have been a poem of infinitely less richness than in its present form. The development of the use of imagery and the theoretical gestures, which are made both in the last 24 lines and in the preface, complete the poem by adding that level of self-conscious reflection both about the instrument of expression, language, about figuration, and about the agent, the mind, and its faculty of imagination. The same self-referring level of “commentary” is evident in numerous other poems, such as “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” beginning at line 43, or in the Wedding Guest framework of “The Ancient Mariner.” “The Eolian Harp” (for example lines 20-25), and “Christabel” (Conclusion to Part I) share this extraordinary, airy incorporeality. The gradual transition in the use of imagery in “Kubla Khan” (which concisely expresses so many of the aesthetic issues of the Eighteenth Century about the purposes of poetry as compared to painting, the nature of genius, and the language of truth as opposed to that of beauty, a dichotomy which all the Romantic poets rejected), from a traditional descriptive, representational function in stanza i to self-conscious representational function and to representation with metaphorical complexity in stanza ii, then contemplation about the medium of poetic language in stanza iii and, finally, self-consciousness about the agency, or imagination itself, can best be described in Coleridge's own terms as the process of “humanizing nature.” “Kubla Khan” more than almost any other poem of classic stature has suffered from the “confounding mechanical regularity with organic form ... The organic form ... is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such is the life, such the form,” as Coleridge says in *Shakespearean Criticism*.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, to speak of the metaphor of genius as paradise is to say something about the nature of imagination, namely, that Coleridge's concept of imagination is almost indistinguishable from Blake's and Shelley's. That is, it (first) "incorporates the Reason in images of the Senses" and, second, correlatively, it "organizes the flux of the Senses by the permanence and selfcircling energies of the Reason." Not only is the concept of imagination the means whereby that "barren dualism" of much of Western philosophy is overcome. In Coleridge's distinction between the primary and secondary imagination we see this reconciliation radically pursued and effected.

Primary imagination is basic, "sensuous" perception itself. But it is the senses at work constructively, actively, and creatively. Put another way, the senses are "imbued with Reason." Coleridge remarked that it is wonderful how close the senses and the reason are. Hence, "intuition," as Kant aptly called sensuous perception, is no contrary to the reason, but reason itself. Relatedly, Blake argued that to the eye of the man of imagination, nature is all imagination itself. Further, Blake insisted in a related insight that the body is the soul's perception of itself through the five senses.

Secondary imagination, or artistic creation, is an echo of primary perception, of primary imagination. Artistic creation is a re-creation which renews, restores, and refreshes the familiar, the no longer strange, the merely customary, or that habitual world which has degenerated, because literalized, and now, like "la Belle Dame," is an unrecognizable world (whether of nature, of language, or of art), a world of primary imagination estranged into the familiar by time and repetition, a world of duality where the senses have become dissociated from the reason.

We may need to distinguish if we are to achieve greater understanding, but we must not divide. The reason we must not divide from the senses. The imagination conceived of both as primary (intelligent perception) and secondary (artistic creation) is that power of reunifying elements (results of reflection) such as the faculties of mind. Imagination is a "self-circling energy" capable of converting elements of a "series into a whole;" it encircles the senses in the reason and vice versa, and transforms reason's series into a sensuous whole.

The senses are not separate from the intellect or reason; these are figures of speech only, constructs of reflection. The senses are imbued with reason, with intellect, with intelligence. We do not just see, we see intelligently and imaginatively. The "reason," that figure of speech, is not superadded to a material which the senses (that other figure of speech) supply us with. Reason is in them, even as the senses are in reason. Hence the Kantian idea of "sensuous intuition"—that direct beholding—is truly a contradiction in terms for any dualistic philosophy.

Kant was, for Coleridge, "no metaphysician," for he lost hold of his own best insight (arrived at in the *Logic*) namely, of rejecting the notion of a sensuous manifold outside reason. Coleridge recovered and restored Kant's earlier insight in his Blakean concept of imagination as a fusion of those figures of speech, the reason and the senses, into a unity constituting the very basis of perception. Mind and world are reunified, seen as metaphors only, or functions of each other since products of reflection and thought, and not traits of some higher reality.

Coleridge's definition of symbol, his theory of imagination, and his insistence on using imagery in the service of ideas are concepts realized in "Kubla Khan" in such a way that the dichotomy between the senses (the so-called concrete, the "essence" of poetry) is overcome. The senses are intellectual, the intellect is sensual. As in Blake and Shelley, imagination bridges and reconciles opposites, including that most terrible opposition of all, life and death. Paradise is no after-life, occurring after death. Paradise is Genius, for it is in acts of the imagination that life and death, self and other, "I am and it is," are reconciled. This is, no doubt, a terrifying Christianity, but nonetheless authentic for its terror, which left as courageous a soul as Kierkegaard in fear and trembling.

1. *Table Talk*, 31 May 1830.
2. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1907), II: 128-9. And see *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York and London, 1957-1990), I: 926.
3. The meaning of "passion" as almost equivalent to imagination is discussed in *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford, 1966-1971), III: 361, *Notebooks*, III: 3615 and 3611, and in *Biographia* II, xviii.
4. Note *Letters*, II: 678-702, the letters to Josiah Wedgwood, which include an account of the indebtedness of Locke to Descartes and the inadequacy of the empiricist dogma.
5. The distinction between metaphor and symbol is not always easy to maintain; in this discussion it is not crucial to do so. Coleridge seems to have used "symbol" the way Shelley used "metaphor," both important preeminently as distinct from allegory. For example, note the *Stateman's Manual* in *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (London and Princeton, 1972), 30, and compare *Notebook*, III: 4503.
6. The image/idea distinction is treated in *Letters*, II: 678-703, *The Friend*, ed. B. E. Rooke (London and Princeton, 1969), I: 464-5, *Lay Sermons*, 101, and *Notebooks*, I: 1842.
7. Compare, for example, *Notebooks*, III: 4501.
8. Compare *Table Talk* 31 May 1830, and *Letters*, II: 864 for Coleridge's criticism of Bowles's inappropriate moralizing of nature in his poetry. Elsewhere he maintains that the only legitimate mode of instruction for the poet is delight (*Biographia* II: 105), for it is not by precepts and by dogmas, but by seeing and experiencing the best possible that we become the best possible.
9. *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London, 1960), I: 198.

## Criticism: L. R. Kennard (essay date 1995)

SOURCE: "Kubla Can: Wordplay in Coleridge's Poetry," *Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Winter, 1995, pp. 8-12.

[In the following essay, Kennard focuses on Coleridge's use of puns in "Kubla Khan."]

Summarizing Coleridge's attitude towards the pun, Sylvan Barnet notes three separate strains: "As a man in social situations he enjoyed puns and punning; as a philosopher he detested distortions of language; as a student of Shakespeare he found explanations for some puns and ignored others" ("Coleridge on Puns," *JEGP* [*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*] 56 [1957] 602-609). Published more than thirty years ago, Barnet's article and subsequent scholarship only tells part of the story. As the work of James McKusick in *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (1986), and of Timothy Fulford's *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (1991) has shown, Coleridge's attention to the pun is in fact central to his lifelong interest in language, an interest that cannot be totally separated from his wider religious and philosophical concerns. As I will show in this paper, the pun is the site of a particular tension in Coleridge's work. Ultimately, this tension sets pleasure and truth against each other, dividing what ought to be united. To flesh out the causes and characteristics of this opposition I turn first to an examination of the way in which wordplay actually functions in his poetry.

A key aspect of Coleridge's wordplay is its self-referentiality. It plays, not simply upon words, but upon the way words work, their essential doubleness. In this paper I will distinguish between two kinds of self-referential wordplay in the poetry. In the first type syntactic ambiguity causes a word to refer both to itself, as signifier, and to something else, as signified. In the second type the pun denotes both the text in which it is found and an independent referent. In each case reference is accompanied by self-reference. For an initial example of the first type, let me turn to "Recollections of Love," one of the "Asra" poems, completed some years after Coleridge first met Sara Hutchinson. In the final verse, the speaker compares his love with the "gentle roar" of the River Greta:

Has not, since then, Love's prompture deep,  
 Has not Love's whisper evermore  
 Been ceaseless, as thy gentle roar?  
 Sole voice, when other voices sleep,  
 Dear under-song in clamour's hour.

(26-30)

Read conventionally, the verse conveys a tone of plaintive resignation. Love is a mere whisper, and the qualifier “evermore,” directed towards the past, suggests “ever since then” rather than “forever.” But there is a different reading: “Has not Love's whisper *evermore* / Been ceaseless as thy gentle roar?” (my italics). Read as a whisper, “evermore” is partially released from its context. As a bare, floating signifier it becomes an agent of redemption, transforming recollection into hope and permanence. And this claim is reaffirmed with each whispered reading. The word “evermore,” wavering between signifier and signified, has bearings that are both referential and self-referential. Similarly, in the last line, “Dear under-song in clamour's hour,” “under-song” refers both to the “gentle roar” of the murmuring Greta and, at the same time, to the muted oscillation of wordplay itself. This doubling is foreshadowed earlier in the poem:

No voice as yet had made the air  
 Be music with your name; yet why  
 That asking look? That yearning sigh?  
 That sense of promise everywhere?

(11-14)

The air, as music as well as atmosphere, bears its own undersong, and Sara Hutchinson's name, encrypted permanently “in clamour's hour,” is indeed part of this music.

The self-referential wordplay that centres on the word “evermore” in this poem is presented differently in a fragment dating from 1807:

And in Life's noisiest hour  
 There whispers still the ceaseless love of thee,  
 The heart's self-solace and soliloquy.

(*PW [Poetical Works]* 499)

“Still” nicely captures the sense of both “whispers” and “ceaseless” in this rendering. But much of the force of the discovered pun on “evermore” is lost. However, the fragment is significant in that it links “Recollections” both to an important strain in Coleridge's earlier work, and to a major tradition in English poetry as a whole.

At the conclusion of *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (1957), M. M. Mahood notes how Shakespeare, Keats and Eliot, in their various explorations of the relationship between art and nature, all use the word “still” as a pun.

When you do dance, I wish you  
 A wave of the sea, that you might ever do  
 Nothing but that, move still, still so.

(*The Winter's Tale* IV.iv.140-3)

In Florizel's description of Perdita's dancing, according to Mahood, “The old antagonism of art and nature disappears, for there is no way in which we can tell the dancer from the dance” (186). But is Perdita the only dancer here?<sup>1</sup>

In the Coleridgean equivalents to this passage, the association between wordplay and dance becomes closer:

Nor ever cease

Yon tiny cone of sand its soundless dance,  
Which at the bottom, like a Fairy's Page,  
As merry and no taller, dances still.

("Inscription for a Fountain on the Heath" 8-11)

Alternately,

The shadows dance upon the wall,  
By the still dancing fire-flames made;  
And now they slumber, moveless all!

("A Day-dream" 25-27)

The dance of fountain or fire-flames is simultaneously silent and perpetual and, paradoxically, motionless. "Still dancing," the play of words becomes a way of making extremes meet, economically achieving the celebrated "balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" that Coleridge was to attribute to the poetic imagination in the *Biographia* (II 12). In this reading, "still" is a subdued qualifier that lends ambiguity to the dancing fire-flames. Yet the relationship can be reversed. In "still dancing," "dancing" also qualifies "still," describing the way in which the word, as a mere word of signifier, dances to and fro, doubling as adjective and adverb. Dance is then a metaphor for wordplay, and "still dancing" an intimate, self-referential partnership.

This sense of wordplay as dance, centred on the word "still," is not confined to Coleridge's minor poems. It is clearly present in "Frost at Midnight":

Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,  
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.  
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature  
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,  
Making it a companionable form,  
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit  
By its own moods interprets

(15-21)

As the lines indicate, the film on the grate, as a "companionable form," is an emblem for the poet's vacillating state of mind. However, as the film "still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing," extremes of sound and silence, motion and rest meet again. The image is doubly reflexive—if the fluttering is stilled, "still" continues to flutter, even now. No wonder Coleridge, with a sly turn of humour that is quite appropriate in context, describes the fluttering motion as "puny," with further reflexiveness.

These examples set a pattern that is followed elsewhere. In the "still roaring dell" of "This Lime-tree Bower my Prison," the leaves of the ash tree "tremble still / Fanned by the water-fall," while the weeds nearby

all at once (a most fantastic sight!)

Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge  
Of the blue clay-stone.

(18-20)

The images in these lines function, as Kathleen Wheeler notes in *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (1981), “as metaphors for poetic language or tropes” (135). In this sense wordplay becomes, in Coleridge's poetry, a trope of tropes, exemplifying the essentially doubled nature of both poetry and wordplay. The play between “fanned” and “fantastic,” despite the bracketing of the latter as a comic aside—“a most fantastic sight!”—is of key importance, since it relates the “fanned,” oscillatory doubling of figurative language to the fantasies of the creative imagination. Imagination can be “fantastic” in this way because in 1797, at the time of writing “This Lime-tree Bower,” Coleridge had not yet discriminated between fancy and imagination (not until the letters to Sotheby in 1802, according to Hill, 7-8).

The play on the word “still” can be traced in other poems, particularly “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “To William Wordsworth.” From the point of view of wordplay “still” is perhaps the key word in Coleridge's poetry. It is synaesthetic, uniting the sensual worlds of light and sound; it becomes oxymoronic, as in “still dancing;” it has important Renaissance intertexts in both Shakespeare and Spenser; and it even allows Coleridge, or his readers, to play cryptically upon the initials of his two forenames. So when, at the close of “To William Wordsworth,” Coleridge finds himself “hanging still upon the sound,” this is not an expression of dependence but an assertion of poetic interdependence. In this phrase, key words of the two poets, Coleridge's “still” and Wordsworth's favourite “hang” are suspended together in an intimate, self-referential partnership.<sup>2</sup>

In the examples I have discussed, the nature of the pun is described metaphorically, or mirrored, by the very imagery that it qualifies. The second kind of reflexive wordplay occurs when the pun denotes both the text in which it is found and an independent referent. As in the first type, the bearings are simultaneously referential and self-referential. In the lines “No voice as yet had made the air / Be music with your name” from “Recollections of Love,” “air” is a pun of this second type, doubling as atmosphere and music or poem. Like all such puns, “air” is then a part of itself, at once a fragment and a whole. This is *symbolic* wordplay in that, in the words of Coleridge's well-known definition, “while it enunciates the whole, [it] abides as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative” (LS 30).

Similar considerations apply in “Kubla Khan”: “with music loud and long I would build that dome in air” (42-46). The dome, built “in air,” becomes music or poetry, an identity that is already foreshadowed, playfully, by the “stately pleasure dome” of the second line. Not only does the pun on “air” equate wholes and parts, it also has a sound basis in physics. This is equally true of the word “measure”: “Where was heard the mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves” (31-34). “Measure” effectively transforms the Khan's precisely decreed geometry into music. It is therefore a pun of origins, lending a Pythagorean logic to the magical see-changes, from eye to ear and ear to eye, that occur with the poem. Moreover, this pun is its own mirror, its own linguistic “mingled measure.”

“Measure” is a pun of synaesthesia and metamorphosis, figuring the transformed world of “deep delight” that lies beyond the realm of everyday experience. And if this is so, it is evident that the word “delight” is also a pun, a charade that like “Abora,” and even “Xanadu” or “Paradise,” plays upon the meanings of its component syllables. This becomes clearer when we look at the way “delight” is used in “The Destiny of Nations”:

Fancy is the power

That first unsensualizes the dark mind,  
Giving it new delights;

(80-82)

The contrast between “dark” and “de-lights” triggers the sense of wordplay here, making the word a charade. In 1796, at the time of writing “The Destiny of Nations,” Coleridge had not yet desynonymized fancy and imagination. It is the power of the imagination, then, that produces de-light, that “unsensualized” mental



pleasure that intimates the synaesthetic, transformed realm that lies beyond the divided multiplicity of ordinary sense-experience.

This transformed realm is one in which, as in wordplay, opposites or extremes can meet in unity. Its emblem in “Kubla Khan” is that central image of Multēity-in-Unity, the “miracle of rare device, / A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice” (35-6). As John Beer pointed out in “The Languages of Kubla Khan,” this unifying image echoes back to Spenser (*Coleridge's Imagination*, ed. Gravit et. al [1985]. “Rare device” is in fact a stock Renaissance phrase, occurring four times in *The Faerie Queene* and once in Shakespeare. And, as Beer again notes, the whole conflated image seems to be foreshadowed in Spenser's *Amoretti* 30:

What more miraculous thing may be told  
That fire which all things melts; should harden yse:  
And yse which is congealed with sencelesse cold,  
Should kindle fire by wonderful devyse?

(9-12)

The juxtaposition of fire and ice is, of course, a familiar Renaissance sonnet conceit. But in the Renaissance conceits were commonly called devices, according to K. K. Ruthven (*The Conceit* [1969] 3). As a result, I suggest that both Spenser's wonderful devyse” and Coleridge's “rare device” function as metalinguistic or reflexive puns, signifying “literary conceit” as well as design, invention, plan and other meanings. Once again, then, “device” acts as a pun that has double, referential and self-referential, bearings, conforming to the pattern I outlined earlier. Moreover, if “device” is a pun that refers to a conceit, it also figures the essential reciprocity of these two tropes. Both may be regarded as agents of transformation. As we move from signifier to signified the pun converts unity into multiplicity while the conceit, in the form that we find it in “Kubla Khan,” does the opposite, forging unity out of multiplicity. Pun and conceit thus go hand-in-hand, as in the phrase “still dancing,” where the pun on “still” sets up the conceit that unites opposites. Both devices signify the possibility of reciprocal movement, between the world of sensual multiplicity on the one hand, and the “unsensualized” world of delight on the other. The conceit is important because, particularly in the frequently-used form of antimetabole, it is an important figure in Coleridge's poetry.

The rhetorical trope of antimetabole inverts or reverses itself, as in “A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,” in “The Eolian Harp” (28), or in the reference to the God who teaches “Himself in all, and all things in himself,” in “Frost at Midnight” (62). In these and other examples antimetabole works to forge unity from difference. In metaphorical terms, moreover, antimetabole not only oscillates through reversal, it also returns to its origin, figuring a circular unity in miniature.

The important role that puns and conceits play in Coleridge's poetry needs to be contextualized in terms of his Shakespearean criticism. In the sixth of his *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, 1811-1812 Coleridge defends puns and conceits against Dr. Johnson and eighteenth-century notions of poetic propriety:

... if people would, in idea, throw themselves back a couple of centuries, they would find that conceits, and even puns, were allowable, because very natural ... I could point out puns in Shakespeare, where they appear almost as if the first openings of the mouth of nature—where nothing else could so properly be said ... I will now (and I hope it will be received with favour) attempt a defence of conceits and puns, taking my examples mainly from the poet under consideration.

(*Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Raysor [1960], II, 89)

It should come as no surprise that the examples mentioned are not recorded in the lecture, and were

presumably not given. But what is striking, in terms of my own argument, is that Coleridge is, indirectly, using Shakespeare to defend his own poetic practice. In the Shakespearean criticism he explains the “natural” quality of puns in psychological terms. In a state of heightened emotion we naturally resort to wordplay, so that puns are “oftentimes one of the most effectual intensives of passion” (SC.I.136). But it should be evident that Coleridge has other, deeper reasons for defending Shakespeare’s wordplay than the ones he gives in this lecture. Unlike ordinary language, the figurative language of puns and conceits can provide a direct imitation of that more natural, or more real, world of harmony in which extremes meet. Against the notions of Johnson and other writers of the eighteenth century, Coleridge defends a Renaissance poetics that also grounds, and finds expression in, his own poems.

In his notebooks and letters, Coleridge adumbrates a theory of poetic language in which the connection between words and their referents is binding rather than arbitrary. As he said in a letter to Godwin in 1800, “I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of *Words & Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too” (CL [*Collected Letters*] 626). A notebook entry of 1809 specifically relates this project to wordplay: “On the pleasure derived from Puns, and Conundrums—words have a tendency to confound themselves & co-adunate with the things” (CN [*Collected Notebooks*] 3542). The pun “Coadunates” or unites words with the “things” to which they refer. It does this because in the pun the word itself, phonetically, provides a definite link between two otherwise separate referents. The pun emphasizes, or foregrounds, the word as signifier and, in doing so, binds words to their referents. By virtue of this, puns are, as McKusick notes, notoriously untranslatable. This is important because, as McKusick goes on to emphasize, “We should bear in mind that Coleridge, in the *Biographia*, uses ‘untranslatableness’ as a criterion of poetic excellence. A poem, like a pun, cannot be translated because its meaning is specific to the actual form of its words” (32).

By virtue of being untranslatable, puns and related tropes are, in other words, exemplary of poetic language at its best. Coleridge’s use of wordplay in his poetry is entirely consonant with these theoretical notions. As an “undersong” or “mingled measure” that flutters, trembles or dances, the Coleridgean pun does indeed appear to become a “living thing.” Uniting referential and self-referential denotation, it throws an additional emphasis on the reflexiveness that is common to all puns. So the pun becomes, even more pointedly in practice than in theory, a privileged exemplar of the poetic function. Poetry then shares the doubled nature of wordplay, looking inwards to itself even as it looks outwards to the world of experience beyond itself. And, as I have emphasized, poetry, through the use of devices such as the pun and the conceit, can directly imitate that transformed, higher reality of Multēity-in-Unity.

Yet, despite the important role that it plays in his practical poetics, Coleridge’s commitment to the poetic pun is ultimately qualified and limited. As my examples demonstrate, the wordplay in his poetry most commonly forms a secretive, coded discourse of hidden second meanings. Neither the projected “Apology for Puns” nor its partner, “An Apology for Conceits”<sup>3</sup> was ever written; nor significantly, is the topic directly mentioned in the *Biographia*. And the psychologically-based defence of puns and conceits in the Shakespearean criticism fails, I have argued, to elucidate Coleridge’s own most compelling reasons for favouring them, and carries overtones of apology. A notebook entry from 1805 indicates, in metaphorical terms, a divided, vacillating attitude towards wordplay. In the note Coleridge confides that he has learnt “seldom *harshly* to chide, those conceits of words which are analogous to sudden fleeting affinities of mind / even as in a dance touch & join & off again, and rejoin your partner that leads down with you the dance spite of those occasional off-starts, all ... forming the delicious harmony” (CN 2396). In this note Coleridge uses dance as an emblem for wordplay, as he does in his poetry. But now the dance figures a delicious promiscuity, a scene of transient couplings that are to be rebuked, although “seldom *harshly*.” Puns and conceits may imitate the “delicious harmony” of the word, but they also lead towards sin. Why, we should ask, this divided attitude, this tension between the wordplayer and a more censorious antagonist?

In addressing this question I should first point out that, far from removing linguistic arbitrariness, Coleridge’s wordplay often works, at the level of ordinary semantics, to promote it. For example if words in “Kubla

Khan” such as “Abora” and “delight” play upon their component syllables, what of the first line, “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan?” May I read this as a question, Xanadu as “can-I-do,” followed by the answer, “Kubla Can?” If we identify the author with Kubla, such a reading makes some sense. “Kubla can” provides a rejoinder to the conditional “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song” of the final stanza. It also answers the Preface, that would persuade us that Kubla-Coleridge cannot, or could not, complete his own poem. It copies the original spelling “Can” in *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (see the note in *PW* 296). In addition, it is playfully echoed in Dorothy Wordsworth’s cryptic journal entry of 1798: “carried *Kubla* to a fountain” presumably refers to her drinking can, not an actual copy of the poem!<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite this contextualization, some readers may still find the reading “Kubla Can” problematical. Isn’t it almost a joke, that trivializes a great canonical poem? Isn’t it, in a word, unauthorized? But this is the very point that needs to be made. The wordplay in Coleridge’s poetry abandons authorial control, enlists the reader as co-author and, in doing so, destabilizes meaning, leading to a multiplicity that is, inevitably, arbitrary. Once we start playing charades with words, as a poem like “Kubla Khan” encourages us to do, where will these games ever end? Second, in “co-adunating” words and things, puns and similar tropes tend to leave truth at the mercy of linguistic accident. The more untranslatable a poem is, the less it would seem to be a suitable symbolic vehicle for conveying lasting truths that lie beyond accidents of expression. Language may shape truth and, as modern theorists know well, we can use wordplay to demonstrate this. Of course, as I have already shown, Coleridge can escape these dilemmas. Poetic tropes symbolize the higher reality of Multēity-in-Unity, not at the fallen level of ordinary reference, but through their structure, which imitates this reality directly. But if puns and conceits reflect a world in which God teaches “Himself in all, and all things in himself,” this sounds dangerously close to an imitation of a pantheism in which the One and the Many exist, not in a relationship of hierarchy but of reciprocal equality. As Thomas McFarland points out in *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (1969), pantheism “exerted the strongest possible repulsion and the most extreme attraction upon Coleridge” (190). One of the reasons, then, that Coleridge’s wordplay is frequently so cryptic, a secret ministry to the initiated, is that it tends, along with poetry itself, to subvert the Christian beliefs that would deny pantheism. The antagonism between the wordplayer, Kubla Can, and his denier therefore reaches to the very heart of Coleridge’s thought.

Coleridge’s practical poetics is in one sense very belated, echoing back to a Renaissance world in which literary tropes such the pun and conceit imitate the harmonious structure of “a world that puns.” Yet it also looks forward, anticipating twentieth century developments in its subversive emphasis on play. So today we might value Coleridge’s wordplay not for its symbolism but for its modernity. It anticipates both the formalist emphasis on poetic concreteness and post-structuralism’s ludic “reign of the signifier.” Through it we rediscover the essential playfulness of a poet who is “still dancing” with words, the secret ministry of one who encrypts his love “in clamour’s hour.” This wordplayer, bard of pleasure, Kubla Can, has, I suggest, been both overlooked and underestimated.

### Notes

1. For another relevant Renaissance intertext to Coleridge’s use of “still,” see *The Faerie Queene*, particularly the “Two Cantos of Mutabilitie” in which Nature is, paradoxically, “Still moving, yet unmoved from her sted” (vii.13.3), while Mutabilitie’s own valorization of motion and change is repeatedly undercut by the same oxymoronic pun (vii, Stanzas 18-22).
2. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth frequently suspends the word at the end of an enjambed line. Much like Coleridge’s “still,” it is an example of self-referential wordplay. For discussion of Wordsworth’s use of “hang.” See Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (1984) 105-114.
3. For further examples of antimetabole in Coleridge’s poetry, see the *Poetical Works* (154, 222, 225, 228, 234, 363, 477, 480, 482, 486, 492). There are also many examples in the prose works, such as his recommendation in the essay “on Poesy or Art” that the artist should aim to produce “likeness in the difference, difference in the likeness, and a reconciliation of both in one” (BL 256).

4. Both projected works are referred to in a marginal note to Donne's *Poems*: "This fine poem has suggested to me many thoughts for 'An Apology for Conceits', as a sequel to an Essay, I have written, called an 'Apology for Puns'." (*Marginalia* II.238)
5. "Upon these I breakfasted and carried *Kubla* to a fountain in the neighbouring market place, where I drank some excellent water" (*Journals* I.34). For a long discussion of this passage, which eventually concludes that the surmise that "Kubla" was a drinking can is "the most likely explanation" of the cryptic passage, see Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium, and "Kubla Khan"* (1966) 298-305.

## Criticism: David Chandler (essay date 1998)

SOURCE: "Two Notes on 'Kubla Khan,'" in *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, No. 102, April, 1998, pp. 64-5.

[In the following essay, Chandler discusses various sources that may have inspired Coleridge to write a particular line in "Kubla Khan."]

### 'I WOULD BUILD THAT DOME IN AIR'

In an important article of 1985, "'Kubla Khan" and Michelangelo's Glorious Boast',<sup>1</sup> Jack Stillinger made a significant contribution to our understanding of Coleridge's most enigmatic poem by demonstrating that the key line, 'I would build that dome in air', almost certainly derives from a 'boast', at one time attributed to Michelangelo, that the cupola of St Peter's would be equivalent to the Pantheon suspended in the air. Unfortunately most of Stillinger's illustrations of the currency of the 'boast' postdate the composition of 'Kubla Khan', but, with the assistance of Philipp Fehl, he found three examples that predate it (in works of 1692, 1781 and 1789). To his list can be added a passage in the 'considerably augmented' third edition of Sir William Chambers' *Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture* (1791):

Michael Angelo, who skilled as he was in mathematical knowledge, could have no very high opinion of the ancient construction; boasted that he would suspend the largest temple of antiquity (meaning the Pantheon) in the air: which he afterwards performed, in the cupola of St Peter's at Rome.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of 'Kubla Khan' it may be deemed particularly suggestive that Chambers was famous for disparaging classical and championing oriental architecture.

Of the works cited by Stillinger, it is Hester Lynch Piozzi's *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey Through France, Italy, and Germany* (1789) that comes closest to Coleridge's phrasing: 'Michael Angelo, looking at the Pantheon, said, "Is that the best our vaunted ancestors could do? If so, I will shew the advancement of the art, in suspending a dome of equal size to this up in the air."' It is not close, of course, and Stillinger speculates that there might be a closer 'source combining the verb "build" ... with the phrase "in the air"'.<sup>3</sup> Such a 'source' can be found in a review of the third edition of Chambers' *Treatise* which appeared in the *Monthly Review* for April 1791. Quoting the above passage, the reviewer, William Seward (1747-99),<sup>4</sup> added an explanatory footnote that immediately brings Coleridge's line to mind:

This singular expression [i.e. 'suspend the largest temple of antiquity ... in the air'] may puzzle some readers: but it means no more, than that Mich. Angelo ... said that he would build a *dome* in the *air*, as large as that which stood on the ground ...<sup>5</sup>

On the whole it must be considered more likely that Coleridge had encountered this idea in the *Monthly Review* than in specialised publications. In April 1791 he was in his final months at Christ's Hospital and reading 'through the catalogue' of a circulating library in nearby King Street.<sup>6</sup> No records of the library

appear to have survived,<sup>7</sup> but other circulating libraries certainly did subscribe to the periodical reviews,<sup>8</sup> of which the *Monthly* was, by a large margin, the most popular.<sup>9</sup> Coleridge, aiming at a wide general knowledge, would almost certainly have turned its pages if opportunity beckoned, and Seward's key phrase, dramatically emphasised at the bottom of a page, was eye-catching. It was also the sort of phrase that a young poet might very well savour and remember.

### ‘FLOATED MIDWAY’

Despite the mass of source-hunting that ‘Kubla Khan’ has inspired, the distinctive phrase ‘Floated midway’ (‘The shadow of the dome of pleasure / Floated midway on the waves’) does not appear to have been glossed. The phrase had been employed by Ann Radcliffe in one of the celebrated landscape descriptions in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, however, and significantly in the context of a river landscape:

The rivulet, which had hitherto accompanied them, now expanded into a river; and, flowing deeply and silently along, reflected, as in a mirror, the blackness of the impending shades. Sometimes a cliff was seen lifting its bold head above the woods and the vapours, that *floated mid-way* down the mountains; and sometimes a face of perpendicular marble rose from the water's edge, over which the larch threw his gigantic arms, here scathed with lightning, and there floating in luxuriant foliage.<sup>10</sup>

Radcliffe's syntax makes it initially unclear whether the floating vapours are being observed directly, or via their reflection in the river, and though the former proves the case there is a residual sense of association with the reflected ‘shades’ of the previous sentence that is suggestive for ‘Kubla Khan’. In Coleridge's poem, as Kathleen Wheeler has written, ‘It is ... unclear how the adverb “midway” should be taken. But the idea of shadow has certain symbolic associations which point to a level of reflection about reality, and about illusion.’<sup>11</sup> It can be added that ‘floated mid-way’ was a formulation that Coleridge was likely to be struck by, and to recall, because he was interested in the ‘hovering’ ‘middle state’ of the act of imagination.<sup>12</sup>

Garland Greever's old claim that Coleridge reviewed *The Mysteries of Udolpho* for the *Critical Review*<sup>13</sup> gained wide currency, but was based on a mistaken premise, and has been sufficiently refuted.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Coleridge did review Radcliffe's next novel, *The Italian*, for that periodical, and this review points to his acquaintance with the earlier novel.<sup>15</sup>

### Notes

1. *English Language Notes* 24 (1985) 38-42 (hereafter Stillinger).
2. *A Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture* (London, 1791), p. 24. The first edition of the *Treatise* had appeared in 1759.
3. Stillinger 41.
4. Reviewers in the *Monthly Review* were identified by Benjamin Christie Nangle, *The Monthly Review First Series 1749-1789* (Oxford, 1934).
5. N.S. 4 (1791) 394.
6. James Gillman, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1838), pp. 17, 20. John Beer identified the library as John Boosey's in his ‘Coleridge's “Great Circulating Library”’, *Notes and Queries* 201 (1956) 264, and see also Duncan Wu, ‘Coleridge's “Great Circulating Library”: A Footnote’, *Notes and Queries* 238 (1993) 470.
7. I am indebted to Richard Harvey of the Guildhall Library, London, for confirming this.
8. Derek Roper, *Reviewing Before the Edinburgh* (London, 1978), p. 25.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
10. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* ed. Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford, 1966), p. 37; my italics.
11. “‘Kubla Khan’ and Eighteenth Century Aesthetic Theories’, *Wordsworth Circle* 22 (1991) 20.

12. I am indebted to Seamus Perry for this observation. In a lecture of 1811 Coleridge spoke of '[the] effort in the mind when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of, to reconcile opposites and to leave a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other when it is hovering between two images' (*Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature* ed. R. A. Foakes (2 vols., Princeton, NJ, 1987), i. 311).
13. *A Wiltshire Parson and His Friends* (London, 1926), p. 165.
14. Derek Roper, 'Coleridge and the "Critical Review"', *Modern Language Review* 55 (1960) 11-16.
15. *Shorter Works and Fragments* ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson (2 vols., Princeton, NJ, 1995), i. 11-16.

## Criticism: Douglas Hedley (essay date 1998)

SOURCE: "Coleridge's Intellectual Intuition, the Vision of God, and the Walled Garden of 'Kubla Khan,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 59, No. 1, January, 1998, pp. 115-34.

[In the following essay, Hedley discusses "Kubla Khan" as a poem written within the visionary mystical tradition that draws upon the central Christian image of the walled garden.]

In his seminal work of 1917 *Das Heilige* Rudolph Otto quotes a number of passages as instances of the "Numinose." Alongside those quotations from more conventional mystics, Plotinus, and Augustine, Otto refers to Coleridge's "savage place" in "Kubla Khan,"<sup>1</sup> It is also pertinent that, when trying to define Romanticism, C. S. Lewis appeals to the longing for the "unnameable something" fired by "morning cobwebs in late summer" or the "opening lines of 'Kubla Khan'."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it is a mere coincidence that two of the most penetrating and influential scholars of religion in the twentieth century should appeal to Coleridge and his poem "Kubla Khan." I wish to suggest reasons why the link between the imagery of "Kubla Khan" and a mystical experience of transcendence is not merely fortuitous. Indeed the connection between Coleridge's mature writing and the imagery of the poem shows that we have good reason for seeing him as consciously writing, both as a poet and as a philosopher, within a visionary mystical tradition. I propose that it is no accident that Coleridge's most visionary poem draws upon the central Christian image of paradise: the walled garden.

This is an attempt not to interpret "Kubla Khan" but rather to suggest Coleridge's place in the history of ideas as a Christian poet and philosopher. He is best described as an essentially speculative and mystical philosopher-theologian.<sup>3</sup> By "speculative" I mean a theology inspired by those Church Fathers who emphasize the "vision" of God as an intellectual contemplation (*speculari*) of the transcendent Absolute, the *prius* of all being. The scholastics, the medieval German mystics, the Cambridge Platonists, and some of the German Idealists have all been influenced by such a speculative impulse.<sup>4</sup> Hegel uses the term "speculative" for his Dialectic.<sup>5</sup>

A philosophical or "speculative" approach to theology has invoked hostility from Tertullian onwards. Coleridge's philosophy of religion often excited the fear of the new pantheistic German theology. John Henry Newman castigated Coleridge's speculation as more heathen than Christian. Yet the speculative movement in theology spawned both a radical and a conservative wing, and we have to judge Coleridge's thought in the light of the more conservative branch of nineteenth-century Idealism. D. F. Strauss jettisoned the transcendent "yonder" of traditional theology in favor of his philosophical or "scientific" approach to Christianity. Coleridge, however, could not adhere to theology of immanence; he wished to present a theology of an adamantly *transcendent* character.

The walled garden is an eminently appropriate image of transcendence and was used as such by the fifteenth-century Christian Platonist Nicholas of Cusa, who is one of the links between Patristic theology and

German Idealism. I shall draw upon his book *The Vision of God* as a paradigm of the sort of speculative mysticism which informs Coleridge's metaphysics and much of his poetry.<sup>6</sup> Reflection upon an exotic poetic image may help us to clarify one of Coleridge's philosophical tenets; the walled garden can be seen to symbolize that transcendent numinous reality, which the soul inchoately and barely consciously seeks and strives for.

### COLERIDGE'S "MYSTICISM" AND THE IMAGERY OF "KUBLA KHAN"

Richard Holmes claims that the "Kubla Khan" provides evidence of a transition in Coleridge's interests and presents this switch from "classical and religious mythology" to the "drama of self-knowledge ... the growth of consciousness and civilisation" as a key to Coleridge's poetry. Holmes writes:

[H]is instinct that the modern Epic subject must now centre on "the mind of man," through "travels, voyages and histories," shows a shift of poetic focus characteristic of the new Romantic age. The Epic could no longer draw on classical or religious mythology for the framework of its action. It must become contemporary with the world of scientific, anthropological, and psychological exploration: it must centre in some way on the drama of self-knowledge, on the growth of consciousness and civilisation.<sup>7</sup>

Coleridge would not have seen a conflict between the drama of self-consciousness and classical and religious mythology. In "Kubla Khan" he is primarily drawing upon ancient symbols. Furthermore, the imagery in the poem does not represent a shift from the *vision of God* through ancient myth to the *mind of man* in "travels, voyages and histories" but is part of his abiding interest in renewing the vision of the divine. It is evident from *Religious Musings* onwards that Coleridge believed that sublime poetry has a special function in Christian apologetics in its capacity to convey something of the enigmatic perception of the Godhead in religious experience.

Coleridge's interest in the vision of God is an obvious link to the mystical tradition. Transformation into the image of God is the heart of his mysticism. In a christological and mystical sense self-consciousness is at the center of Coleridge's philosophical and theological thought: "Self, which then only *is*, when *for itself* it hath ceased to be. Even so doth Religion finitely express the *unity* of the infinite Spirit by being a total act of the soul."<sup>8</sup> This is not, as is sometimes thought, pantheism but a conscious echo of St. Paul: "Yet not I but Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20) and the mystical motif of the "inborn Christ."<sup>9</sup> For Platonists like Coleridge the inner light of the Platonism is identified with the indwelling glorified Christ.

In a note on the Platonist Thomas Burnet, Coleridge remarks in 1796/97: "Love transforms the souls into a conformity with the object loved."<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Coburn quotes Burnet

*An Immense Being* does strangely fill the Soul: and Omnipotency, Omniscency, and Infinite Goodness do enlarge and dilate the Spirit, while it fixtly looks upon them. They raise strong Passions of Love and Admiration, which melt our Nature, and transform it into the mould and image of that which we contemplate.<sup>11</sup>

The following famous and much quoted passage resounds with Burnet:

My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great*—something *one & indivisible*—and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!—But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity!<sup>12</sup>

The affinity between this passage and the waterfalls, mountains, and caverns of "Kubla Khan" has stuck many commentators. Burnet himself is a writer who proves, alongside Plato and Jeremy Taylor, that poetry of the

“highest kind” can exist in prose form.<sup>13</sup> Yet in what sense can we appreciate that the sublime enlarges and inspires the soul to imitate the Divine?<sup>14</sup> What is the link between the Platonic idea of the transformation of the soul and the oriental landscape of “Kubla Khan”? Another early note is perhaps helpful: “In the paradisiacal World Sleep was voluntary & and holy—a spiritual before God, in which the mind elevated by contemplation retired into pure intellect suspending all commerce with sensible objects & perceiving the present deity.”<sup>15</sup> Lowes and Coburn refer here to Burnet and the idea of contemplation in the New Jerusalem. But it is not clear why the young Coleridge, at a time when he was ordering Plotinus and Proclus from Thelwell, should draw on the ideas of the *Mundus Paradisiacus* and the intellectual vision of God.<sup>16</sup>

Here it is helpful to use Nicholas of Cusa's *The Vision of God*, where ideas common among the later Christian Platonists like Burnet are expressed with particular precision and power.<sup>17</sup> In order to appreciate this point, it is necessary to reflect upon what are meant by the concept of prophecy, by the highly suggestive and rich image of paradise as a walled garden, and by the goals of a genuinely philosophical mysticism. First, however, we shall consider the theme of self-consciousness and mythological imagery.

In the passage quoted above Holmes suggested that the interest in travel and biography entails a shift from traditional classical and Christian images. This is dubious for two reasons. First, it is well known that Coleridge had a long standing interest and admiration for *Robinson Crusoe*. In this novel Daniel Defoe employs quite explicitly Christian ideas of providence and dependence upon Divine grace together with a Protestant emphasis upon individual resourcefulness. Coleridge remarks:

Crusoe himself is merely a representative of humanity in general; neither his intellectual nor his moral qualities set him above the middle degree of mankind; his only prominent characteristic is the spirit of enterprise and wandering, which is, nevertheless, a very common disposition. You will observe that all that is wonderful in this tale is the result of external circumstances—of things which fortune brings to Crusoe's hand.<sup>18</sup>

It would be extreme to suggest that “Kubla Khan” is as explicitly Christian as Robinson Crusoe, but it is significant that the precedent for the mixture of Christian ideas in an exotic pagan environment is evident in eighteenth-century English literature.<sup>19</sup>

In the second place Coleridge was the first Englishman to take a serious interest in biblical studies during a period of deep interest in the mythological. Creuzer, Schelling, and Hegel paid profound attention to the interpretation of classical mythology during the early part of the nineteenth century, while De Wette applied the concept of “myth” to Christian theology. This interest in myth was the background of Strauss's famous attempt to see the whole of the Gospel account as “mythic”—meaning that he saw the events described in the New Testament as a product of the self-consciousness of the earliest Christian community. This is a particularly radical instance of demythologizing, but it was the result of an interest in the “mythic” in German Idealistic and Romantic thought at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The interest in “myth” was a product not of a broadly empiricist but of an idealistic school of thought, a school which was not interested just in scientific and anthropological exploration, but in speculation concerning the Absolute.

Hegel was intent on rehabilitating the mythic as the symbolic expression of those truths, which the Enlightenment, with its mechanical view of reason, had dismissed. Strauss's left-wing Hegelianism was tied to a strongly anthropological interpretation of myth.<sup>20</sup> Schelling's work on myth, however, increasingly became the great expression of Divine transcendence. Coleridge and the German Idealist share this “high” view of myth rather than the “low” view of myth in Strauss. Coleridge writes: “The material universe, saith a Greek philosopher, is but one vast complex mythos” (i.e., symbolical representation): and mythology the apex and complement of all genuine physiology.<sup>21</sup>



Whereas the background of Strauss's view of myth is a pantheistic concept of Divinity derived from a particular interpretation of Hegel, Coleridge's view of myth is determined by a Neoplatonic view of the mythic as expressing the *transcendence* of the Divine—a thought shared, incidentally, by the later Schelling.<sup>22</sup> This is significant as it indicates not that Christian imagery is replaced by the drama of self-consciousness but rather that it is the vehicle of Coleridge's novel vision in “Kubla Khan.” In order to appreciate this point we have to turn to the image or symbol of the *walled garden*.

## CHRISTIAN PARADISE IMAGERY

For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (23)

Which paradise one may ask? Coleridge's reading of Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimage* (1614) is the starting point of the imagery (“In Xanada did *Cublai Can* build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightful Streames ...”).<sup>24</sup> This is certainly the formal inspiration for the walled garden motif. Opium obviously played a role. Coleridge wrote to his brother describing divine repose given by laudanum: “a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees in the very heart of a waste of sands!”<sup>25</sup> The area of North Western Somerset is perhaps reflected in the poem: caverns, chasms, and a river running into the sea. Is it merely the depiction of an altered state of mind? Or is Coleridge employing, however obliquely, a deeply Christian symbol in the poem? Even if we admit that the Devonshire parson's son is likely to have been influenced by Christian images of paradise, we still have no clear answer to this question.

We can follow Elinor Shaffer in her powerfully argued and imaginative book, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem*. Here Shaffer has produced convincing evidence of the fusing of the Oriental landscape of “Kubla Khan” with the vision of Jerusalem in the Apocalypse of St. John.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, how does the city of God described in the book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of John, relate to the garden idyll of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis? The Christian image of paradise is bewilderingly complex. At the beginning of the Christian scriptures one finds a story of the transgression of Adam and Eve in their paradisaical garden habitat; however, the last book of Scripture depicts paradise as a holy city populated by angels. Thus there is no one single paradise image in the Bible. The secluded garden and the city of angels are very distinct images of paradise; yet there are links between the two. John presents the heavenly Zion as having the tree of life in its midst (Revelations 2:7, 22:2), and both are perhaps rooted in pre-exilic Jerusalem and the Temple cult.<sup>27</sup> The motif of the Temple-garden is evident largely in Apocalyptic Judaism and the Christians, especially in the book of Enoch and the Revelation of John. As Christianity moved into the rest of the Hellenistic world, the sacred significance of Jerusalem was lost, but the connection between the Temple-City and paradise is perpetuated through the imagery of the Church as paradise provisionally regained.

John Beer has argued convincingly that we can see the influence of James Bruce's discovery of the Ethiopian Enoch upon Coleridge.<sup>28</sup> Whether the image of the garden city is transmitted through Jewish Apocalyptic thought or through the Christian image of Jerusalem, when we turn to “Kubla Khan” we find a picture of paradise that conforms readily to the mountain-city-garden imagery which we have been discussing:

So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round:  
And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills (29)

Our interest lies not merely in the imagery of walled garden or heavenly city, but in the mechanism of the vision. The aptness of the “flashing eyes” and “floating hair” as autobiographical has been often noted. Coleridge seems to be presenting himself in a prophetic role.

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!(30)

Is the identification of the poet with a prophetic role little more than romantic excess? Perhaps not, if we reflect on the vulgar sense of a pro-phet (a pre-dictor or fore-sayer) in favor of the “seer.” A prophet is not so much a predictor of future events as a seer of the eternal: the prophetic role is that of the “apocalypse” or “revelation” of that which is hidden. It is no accident, then, that Luke writes of the revealing of the heavenly secrets at the baptism of Jesus: “Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened” (Luke 3:21). It was this image of the *opening of the heavens* which fascinated those theologians with philosophical concerns and who wrestled with the Platonic-Aristotelian legacy of a metaphysical contemplation of the Divine.<sup>31</sup> Like Coleridge later, Cusa was just such a theologian.

## NICHOLAS OF CUSA AND THE VISION OF GOD

Within the Christian tradition we find at least two images of paradise and two models of prophecy: the garden/city and prediction/vision. The edges of these distinctions are rather blurred in practice, but it is worth reflecting upon the rich potential of the images here. If we return to the text of Cusa, we find a strong emphasis on paradise as the walled garden and the vision of God as the glimpsing beyond the walls as the basis of his spiritual exercise or meditation, *The Vision of God*.<sup>32</sup> Originally composed for the monks at Tegernsee in Bavaria, this text is expressly written as an aid for the contemplation of God. Through the work, Nicholas wishes to show the monks that the vision is attainable, even easy. Nevertheless, the monks have to be aware of the enigmatic quality of the divine vision.

The central biblical passage is 2 Cor. 12:3f, in which Paul speaks of a man “caught up into paradise.” This *raptus* was termed within the philosophical tradition “*excessus*.”<sup>33</sup> For Cusa, God can only be seen in that intellectual rapture in which the categories of discursive thought are sublimated. This is seen not as a rejection of the intellect but as the highest point of rational contemplation. The *visio intuitiva* is the culmination of the ancient hierarchy of knowledge, *sensus-ratio-intellectus*, and in conjunction with the idea of the *imago Dei*. In order to see that which is not an object, i.e., God, the human mind must put aside its own discursive differentiating reflection. In accordance with the maxim *simile simili*, the mind becomes like its object by divesting itself of difference in order to experience absolute unity.<sup>34</sup>

The model of this non-objective seeing is largely Neoplatonic, yet the imagery is distinctively Christian. God dwells within the *muris paradisi* the wall of paradise which is guarded by the highest spirit of Reason. God, within these walls, is the trans-categorical unity, the coincidence of opposites. Cusa uses one very striking image in order to express this coincidence of opposites, the spinning top.<sup>35</sup> The fast-spinning top appears motionless; rest (*status*) and movement (*motus*) coincide in the spinning top. This image should express the thought that God transcends the polarities of finite thought rather than a pantheistic identification of the polarities. It is the eminent unity of God as the absolute which is the creative foundation of the finite realm and which distinguishes God from His creation.<sup>36</sup>

Here we have the characteristically Neoplatonic dialectic of immanence and transcendence. As the coincidence of polarities, God radically transcends all polarities. It is because of this knowledge of the limits of finite speculation and reflections upon the special conditions required for a vision of God that Cusa's thought is a *docta ignorantia*. In the *Vision of God*, the walls of the coincidence are explicitly identified with the walls of paradise. Only by overcoming the highest discursive thought (*spiritus altissimus rationis*), which guards the walls of paradise, can entry be obtained. The vision of God “beyond” the walls of the garden of paradise is certainly enigmatic: it is the sublimation of discursive reflection in the intuitive vision.

## “KUBLA KHAN” AND THE COINCIDENCE OF OPPOSITES

“Kubla Khan” is undoubtedly influenced by Coleridge's use of opium, the luxuriant Somerset countryside, and the contemporary interest in travel literature. Yet the link between the Garden city and prophetic or mystical vision in the Christian tradition is so strong that it seems unlikely that the combination in Coleridge's poem is merely fortuitous. It is a mark of a great artist when he can draw upon deep traditional symbols and images, and employ them in an unusual and perhaps alien context. The first aphorism of *Aids to Reflection* is of interest here:

In philosophy equally as in poetry it is the highest and most useful prerogative of genius to produce the strongest impressions of novelty, while it rescues admitted truths from the neglect caused by the very circumstance of their universal admission. Extremes meet. Truths, of all others the most awful and interesting, are too often considered as so true, that they lose all the power of truth, and lie bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with the most despised and exploded errors.<sup>37</sup>

Not only do we have the hint of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, “opposites meet,” but we can see that Coleridge is concerned to rescue “admitted truths.” He does not see his project in terms of the Hegelian mythological school as the application of Wissenschaft (i.e., Hegelian philosophy) to Scripture. There is in Strauss a philosophical and historical “Whiggism,” as it were, completely alien to Coleridge. Consider the title of Strauss's work, *Die Christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft*—“historical development” meaning the historical dialectic of Hegelianism and “modern science” meaning the philosophy of Hegel.

The mystical or Platonic emphasis on the Divine transcendence is sometimes overlooked by literary scholars. Elinor Shaffer sees Coleridge as drawing upon the mythical school in German biblical criticism, in particular the work of Eichhorn on Revelation:

His is one of the finest achievements of the new criticism, going beyond Schelling's *Philosophie der Mythologie* ... and beyond Strauss himself in his comprehension of the mythological bases of the leading ideas of his society, and it has still not been properly appreciated either in England or in Germany.<sup>38</sup>

What does it mean to say that Coleridge went beyond Schelling and Strauss? We find two very different views of myth in the latter two. Strauss is “full of respect for this religion: which is the content of the highest religion, the Christian, conscious of itself as identical with the highest philosophical truth. ...”<sup>39</sup> This is the left wing Hegelianism of Strauss. At the center of Hegel's philosophy of religion is the distinction between *Begriff* (idea) and *Vorstellung* (representation). Religion represents the (philosophical) *Begriff* in the narrative language of *Vorstellung*. A good example is the doctrine of the Trinity: God as the self-conscious Absolute (*Begriff*) is represented as the community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The central tenet of theological Hegelianism is that the Christian narrative can be translated into philosophical truth when shorn of its imperfect expression. This idea, however, can be taken two ways. It can be interpreted as the *justification* of the Christian religion by means of showing its philosophical truth as *Begriff*. The speculative theologians Daub and Marheineke understood Hegel's project as the culmination of the ancient Christian tradition of philosophical theology which goes back to Clement of Alexandria. Yet the distinction between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff* can be understood in another way, that is, as the *critique* of existing religion. It is in this way that the “young” Hegelians such as Strauss or Feuerbach understood the importance of Hegel's philosophy of religion. This meant seeing the true Hegelian project as radically critical of traditional Christian belief. Coleridge was indeed an idealist, but of the more conservative kind and speculative in the older sense of the word.

The other point of significance here is Strauss's view of his own activity as a systematic theologian. Whereas F. C. Baur saw his own work as primarily historical, Strauss wished to present *Das Leben Jesu* and *Die*

*Christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft* as works of systematic theology. This is to say that the historical critical analysis is a preparation for a systematic theology which rejects the Platonic idea of the Good as transcendent:

It is well known that the Hegelian school is determined by a strict observance of Christianity as the religion of the unity of the Divine and the Human ... the basic idea of Christianity is the atonement: that is, the sublimation of the intelligible and the sensual realms, yonder and here.<sup>40</sup>

Christology is the hidden agenda of *Das Leben Jesu*: "Humanity is the union of the two natures."<sup>41</sup> Coleridge, by way of contrast, maintained the mystical insistence upon the transcendence of the Divine, whereas the Hegelian Strauss saw Christology as a representation of the union of the spiritual and material in humanity within an essentially pantheistic metaphysics. The vision of God for Coleridge remains the center of his thought throughout his intellectual life. He maintains that the mind of man is a bridge to the vision of God, but by no means its fulfillment. "The vision and the faculty divine" is the participation of humanity in the Divine.

We considered at the beginning of this essay Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Coleridge's (accurate) insistence that the spiritual dimension of the novel is dominant, especially the motif of the shipwreck and the dependence upon Divine grace. In a notebook passage from the autumn of 1809 Coleridge links this motif to the Platonic idea of the awakening:

The moment, when the Soul begins to be sufficiently self-conscious, to ask concerning itself, & its relations, is the first moment of its *intellectual* arrival into the World—Its *Being*—enigmatic as it must seem—is posterior to its *existence*. Suppose the shipwrecked man stunned, & for many weeks in a state of Ideotcy or utter loss of Thought & Memory—& then gradually awakened.<sup>42</sup>

Strauss regards the weakness of traditional Christianity as its "abstract transcendence" of the Divine, which he contrasts with the philosophical principle of immanence of Hegel.<sup>43</sup> Coleridge, however, maintains throughout his intellectual career the conviction in the reflection or bending back of the soul from the sensual to the intelligible realm. His *Aids to Reflection* consists of aphorisms from and marginalia upon a Scottish Christian Platonist and mystic, Archbishop Leighton. Leighton writes approvingly:

The Platonists divide the world into two, the sensible and intellectual world. ... These sentiments are not unlike the notions, which the masters of cabalistical doctrine among the Jews, concerning God's *sephiroth* and seal, wherewith, according to them, all the worlds, and every thing in them, are stamped and sealed; and these are probably near akin to what Lord Bacon of Verulam calls his *parallela signacula* (corresponding marks), and *symbolizantes schematismi* (symbolic figures). According to this hypothesis, these parables and metaphors, which are often taken from natural things to illustrate such as are divine, will not be similitudes taken entirely at pleasure; but are often, in a great measure, founded in nature, and the things themselves.<sup>44</sup>

Leighton sees the dualism between the transcendent spiritual and the mundane realms as common to Platonism and Jewish speculation. This he views as the foundation of the genuinely symbolic. Clearly Coleridge shares this belief in the correspondence between Platonic metaphysics and a theory of the symbolic. He comments on the above passage:

I have asserted the same thing, and more fully shown wherein the difference consists of symbolic and metaphorical, in my first Lay Sermon; and the substantial correspondence of the genuine Platonic doctrine and logic with those of Lord Bacon, in my Essays on Method, in

the Friend.<sup>45</sup>

Leighton writes of the glory of God as the supreme and transcendent end of all: “all things returning, in a most beautiful circle, to this, as the original source from which they took their rise.”<sup>46</sup> The Neoplatonic terminology of Leighton is fairly clear: the procession and return of being to the transcendent source. Coleridge nevertheless berates Leighton for not explaining what he means by the “glory” of God. The passage is dense and poetic:

The right interpretation, I presume, is the manifestation of the Supreme Being, *as* the Supreme Being in the Existent as existent. Thus: the Rays in their divergence from the Solar unity (Apollo; from a not and polloi many) are the Glory of the Sun, in the first & most proper sense—then the surrounding Clouds, penetrated by the Rays and as it were, saturated with the Light, form a second Glory—viz. the resplendency of the Light, so that we behold the Light itself as well as the Objects *by* the light—its *Glory* is spread out on the earth.<sup>47</sup>

The “glory” is an efflux of the transcendent Divine Unity: Apollo or Not-Many.

Note 50<sup>2</sup> in the *Marginalia* states that this is not the “usual” etymology of Apollo. The etymology is, in fact, from Plotinus. The designation (aj-povllwn) is used for the One as the expression of His unity: the “not many.”<sup>48</sup> The One is all because everything is through or out of Him. But the One is not “all” in a pantheistic sense;<sup>49</sup> it is the Origin, Principle (ajrchv) or Cause of all.<sup>50</sup> It is the all-encompassing condition of the many, of difference and division: the ground of precisely all forms of being, but not subject to their conditions.<sup>51</sup> Hence even concepts like “origin,” “cause,” or “ground” express the relation of the other to the One but they do not express the One Itself. Plotinus says:

For to say that it is the cause is not to predicate something incidental of it but of us, because we have something from it while that One is in itself; but one who speaks precisely should not say “that” or “is”; but we run round it outside, in a way, and want to explain our own experiences of it, sometimes near it and sometimes falling away in our perplexities about it.<sup>52</sup>

Nicholas of Cusa's philosophical theology seems to have been based upon a mystical vision, which he experienced on the journey from Constantinople in 1437 and which led to the *De docta ignorantia* (1440). It was here that he developed the concept of the *coincidentia oppositorum* as the metaphysical expression of the radical transcendence of God, who, as the Ground of all, like the One of Plotinus, is no particular thing, and on the basis of His absolute simplicity (to; aJplw's eto; aJplouvstato)<sup>53</sup> is “not many” (aj-povllwn). This is not a mere remoteness, a God who is the highest point of the chain of being, but the Principle who radically transcends the physical cosmos.<sup>54</sup> Such a transcendence is compatible with radical immanence because the Godhead is no “thing”; He is not limited or constrained by those factors which determine entities in the cosmos, and thus is enigmatically not other—“non aliud.”<sup>55</sup> Hence the image of such a radically transcendent God as a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.

The physical universe is, for Cusa, an image of God and indeed the material realm is His self postulation (*identificare*).<sup>56</sup> Yet the Principle or God remains supremely *Himself*. Rather than being exhausted by the creative self-postulation, God abides transcendentally exalted (*superexaltatus*). Coleridge notes: “above all *vide* Cusan. Dialog. de Genesi, quomodo idem identificando plurali-tatem producit.”<sup>57</sup> In the relevant passage in Cusa “idem” is the enigmatic name for God who in creation reproduces Himself, but as absolute identity, the *idem absolutem*, God is not diminished by this production of plurality. In *De visione Dei* Cusa states: “Creation and being created is the communication of Your being to all, so that You are all in everything, and yet You remain above all.”<sup>58</sup>

The paradox of the Principle who is the basis of difference and yet superior to, or beyond, categorical difference is a central tenet in speculative theology of Cusa. The trinitarian Godhead within the “walls of paradise” is *aj-povllwn* and yet reflexive. The relation of the persons of the Trinity is one of *aequalitas absoluta*, the sublimation of polarities in the Absolute. The image of the “wall” emphasizes the Platonic idea of the transcendence of the *principium* or *ajrchv*. It means that the polarities of the sensible realm point to a higher resolution in the transcendent unity of the Godhead. This is the point of Coleridge's remark: “[H]e alone deserves the title of a Philosopher, who has attained to see and learnt to supply the difference between Contraries that preclude, and Opposites that reciprocally suppose and require, each the other.”<sup>59</sup>

The contemplative ascent of the mind which Coleridge, as a Platonist, envisages as the philosophical task, is an ascent from the polarities of manifested being to the unity of the Divine ideas. Again: “There is in Form ... something which is not elementary but divine. The contemplation of Form is astonishing to man and has a kind of Trouble or Impulse accompanying it which exalts his Soul to God.”<sup>60</sup> What is the “admitted truth” which Coleridge saw himself as reviving? Was it a pantheistic sense of absolute dependence of popular Romanticism, or the rather truncated rationalism of Kant's philosophy of religion? Coleridge wished to evoke in poetry and defend in philosophy the ideas of participation in the Divine life and the vision of God. This is why he saw himself as renewing the Christian Platonism of the English seventeenth century. Yet he was not merely reviving Thomas Burnet, Robert Leighton, or Henry More. The most important contemporary influence on Coleridge was Schelling, for whom philosophy “is always and thoroughly in the Absolute” (*immer und durchaus im Absoluten ist*), an Absolute whom Schelling describes in terminology remarkably close to Plotinus and Cusanus as One “without opposition” or “One which is above opposition” (*Eine ohne Gegensatz* or *Eine, das über allen Gegensatz erhoben*).<sup>61</sup>

Coleridge's direct relationship to Cusa is hard to determine.<sup>62</sup> Coleridge quotes a passage from the Platonist Thomas Jackson on the eternity of the ideas, and here Coleridge writes “above all vide Cusan. Dialog. de Genesi.”<sup>63</sup> The affinity of thought between Coleridge and Cusa is striking. In a notebook passage Coleridge comments:

The Sun when you gaze at it, dazzle blinds you / When you acknowledge its presence (know it by the absolute faith of habitual deduction, so rapid as to become identical with the stand-still of Intuition)—(= a wheel in its maximum of motion equal in the consciousness to Rest / there being no perceptible time between its being A (and) B)—all things become clear by it / —acknowledge the cause & avail yourself of its Effects.<sup>64</sup>

The model of the spinning wheel is strikingly close to Cusa's image of the spinning top. Both philosophers wish to account for the enigmatic quality of the perception of the Divine. As we have already suggested, behind the idea of the transcendence of the Divine unity lies the conviction that God is by no means remote. The “Vision of God” is ambivalent: is it the vision of God as subject or God being seen by the finite eye? Cusa employs both interpretations of the vision. Although the text is the introduction to the contemplation of the Divine for monks, the active Divine Seeing, i.e., God's own providence and caring for the world as its creator, dominates the meditation. Similarly for Coleridge, although the Divine light cannot be directly seen, humanity and creation in general “avails” itself of the “effects” of the Divine providence. In a central passage in *Aids to Reflection* Coleridge argues that the ideas of Reason

can come forth out of the molds of the Understanding only in the disguise of two contradictory conceptions, each of which is partially true, and the conjunction of both conceptions becomes the representative or *expression* [= the *exponent*] of a truth *beyond* conception and inexpressible. Examples: before Abraham *was*, I *am*—God is a Circle the centre of which is every where, and circumference is nowhere.<sup>65</sup>

In the third stanza of “Kubla Khan” we find, as John Beer notes, “a moment of miraculous unity between the contending forces—the sunny dome and the caves of ice, the fountains and the caves, the dome and waves all being counterpoised in one harmony.”<sup>66</sup> This unity of contending forces poetically expresses the mystical idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

### **AIDS TO REFLECTION AND THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH**

Coleridge's central goal in this text is to show how the work of the true philosopher supports rather than subverts the Christian Church. The “true or paramount aim” of the Christian Church “is *another* world, not a world *to come* exclusively, but likewise *another world that now is*. ...”<sup>67</sup> This is the Platonism of his early career (“Life is a vision shadowy of Truth”<sup>68</sup>), not a vague “other-worldliness.” Christianity is, for Coleridge, precisely the “awful Recalling of the drowsed soul from the dreams and phantom world of sensuality to *actual* Reality.”<sup>69</sup> In another passage on Leighton, Coleridge writes of the vision of God in the book of Revelation and how St. John “beheld a new Earth and a new Heaven as antecedent to or co-incident with the appearance of the New Jerusalem—i.e. the state of Glory, and the Resurrection to life everlasting.”<sup>70</sup>

The concept of Glory, which Coleridge, as we have seen above, defines in Neoplatonic terms, is linked to the vision of the heavenly city, where the walls of paradise are the walls of the finite intellect. The transformation of self-consciousness through the aid of the indwelling Christ is a foretasting of the dwelling in the heavenly city. The heavenly city is an emphatic image of transcendence: of that which is “beyond Being.”<sup>71</sup>

By now it seems clear that Richard Holmes's contention which we noted at the beginning of the essay is quite unconvincing. First, what appears as a transition from classical and religious mythology to the issue of self knowledge cannot mean a shift from religious to more secular interests, a move from the vision of God to the mind of man in the sense of D. F. Strauss or George Eliot. Elinor Shaffer is correct to point out the philosophical nature of Coleridge's understanding of myth, but she is wrong in her interpretation of that philosophy.<sup>72</sup> Coleridge does not see myth as the projection of a given community. He sees it as a primordial expression of transcendent truths, an idea which itself is rooted in the rich Neoplatonic tradition of a philosophical mythology.<sup>73</sup> What certainly cannot be claimed is that

whatever the literal, documentable truth might be found to be, the historical experience of conviction within the Christian community was in itself a form of validation, and this experience could be maintained and reawakened through an imaginative grasp of what that experience had been.<sup>74</sup>

This is certainly not true of Coleridge, who, in the classical idealistic (one might say Hegelian) manner, believes that the mysteries of the Christian Faith “*are* Reason, Reason in its highest form of Self-affirmation.”<sup>75</sup>

The language of self-affirmation is derived both from Schelling and Trinitarian theology.<sup>76</sup> Coleridge does not mean the experience of the Christian community but the eternal ideas of Reason, which he wishes to distinguish from the finite categories of the human understanding. These “can come forth out of the moulds of the Understanding only in the disguise of two contradictory conceptions.”<sup>77</sup> In the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge writes that “an idea, in the *highest* sense of that word, cannot be conveyed but by *symbol*. ...”<sup>78</sup> The ideas of Reason cannot be analyzed into a propositional content; to do so would be to apply human categories to eternity. Yet this does not mean that the ideas have no practical application. Coleridge insists that a prophet has a specific, practical role in society. One of his favorite examples is Edmund Burke, who “referred habitually to *principles*. He was a *scientific* statesman; and therefore a *seer*.”<sup>79</sup> “Principles” is a term with a specific meaning for Coleridge, i.e., “ideas” in the Platonic sense. Coleridge remarks: “At the annunciation of *principles*, of *ideas*, the soul of man awakes, and starts up, as an exile in a far distant land at the unexpected sounds of his native language. ...”<sup>80</sup>

Coleridge saw the great weakness of his Empiricist contemporaries as blindness to principles or ideas. The role of a writer like Burke, Coleridge believed, lay in his capacity for vision and was therefore prophetic because “what proceeds from a divine impulse, that the godlike alone can awaken.”<sup>81</sup> Moreover, in *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, Coleridge argues that a whole class of society should be dedicated to the awakening of principles and ideas: the clerisy. He also knew the medieval image of the walled garden as the locus of the vision of God. The symbol of the walled garden was used by the Church Fathers as an image for the soul and for the Church.<sup>82</sup> Coleridge describes himself as “[i]ntensely studious by Habit, and languidly affected by motives of Interest or Reputation, I found my Books and my own meditations a sort of high-walled Garden, which excluded the very sound of the World without.”<sup>83</sup>

Coleridge also describes his own Church as a garden, albeit one where Socinianism and Ultra Socinianism have dipped beneath the fence of the garden of the Church through neglect of the richer traditions of metaphysical Divinity evident in Leighton or the Cambridge Platonists.<sup>84</sup> Hence he developed the idea of *Aids to Reflection*, a book consisting of marginalia and commentary on the great, dead, mystic Divines of the Established Church.

## CONCLUSION

Coleridge remained throughout his literary career, in John Beer's terms, “a visionary.” He was a philosophical “mystic” who insisted upon the proper and accurate exercise of the intellect, and like the Cambridge Platonists he had little temperamental inclination towards the emotional excesses, swoons, and depressions found in many of the Christian spiritual writers. Nor did he, again like the Cambridge Platonists, have much sympathy for the apophatic mystical tradition. Yet despite this caveat it is perhaps not surprising that C. S. Lewis and Rudolf Otto should appeal, however obliquely, to Coleridge and the walled garden of “Kubla Khan.” Otto was an outstanding scholar of both Romanticism and mysticism, and Lewis's attempt to defend the “discarded image” of Christian Platonism, doctrinal orthodoxy and the rights of the imagination was a profoundly Coleridgean cocktail. Both Otto and Lewis, I suggest, saw the visionary and the mystic in the English Romantic poet.

In the last chapter of his *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge describes a mystic who wanders into an oasis or garden “at leisure in its maze of Beauty and Sweetness, and thrids [sic] his way through the odorous and flowering Thickets into open ‘Spots of Greenery.’”<sup>85</sup> Quite apart from the quote from line 11 of “Kubla Khan,” “... Enfolding sunny spots of greenery,” the language of this passage in *Aids to Reflection* is, as John Beer points out in his notes, “reminiscent” of the beginning of “Kubla Khan.”<sup>86</sup> The chapter is a reply to allegations of “mysticism.” Coleridge does not think it worth replying to charges like “Visionary Ravings ... Transcendental Trash &c.”;<sup>87</sup> but the charge—from people whom Coleridge respects—that his philosophy is mysticism, is a criticism which Coleridge considers seriously, and his answer is deeply suggestive.

Coleridge describes two sorts of visionaries, whom he regards as fantasists rather than philosophical visionaries. He presents two pilgrims in an allegory of the raw and the subtle fantasist, Boehme and Fénelon respectively. Although Coleridge is critical of both types of thinkers, he does not dismiss their claims altogether. They are marred in both cases by a tendency to confuse their own sensibility with the object of their vision, i.e., a failure to take the Divine transcendence seriously enough. The upshot of the discussion is that Coleridge thinks that the charge of mysticism is rooted in the unreflective materialism of the age. Yet Coleridge's approval of a genuine mysticism, which contemplates the Good which is “beyond being,” is quite evident.<sup>88</sup>

C. S. Lewis wrote an allegory, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Defence for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*, whose central idea is the “dialectic of Desire” which drives the soul to seek for spiritual satisfaction in God and the “fatal error” of thinking that the longing of the soul can be satisfied by anything less. Lewis's idea is based not solely on Bunyan but also on Augustine's *Confessions*, and has its philosophical basis in Plato's description in the *Republic* and the *Symposium* of the spirit's longing for the Good “beyond



Being.” Lewis is defining Romanticism in terms of a mystical experience of a transcendent good. Coleridge was such a visionary in the Christian sense of a seer beyond the walls of the heavenly city, and a seer who, like Cusa, felt that though metaphysics is unavoidable, the Christian vision cannot be reduced to a battery of bloodless categories but remains holy, unnameable, and transcendent. It is hence no accident, I wish to suggest, that the first great British Idealist of the nineteenth century preferred the intellectual intuition of Plotinus or Schelling to the rigorously conceptual “Dialectic” of Hegel. The image of the walled garden is a profound and fertile symbol of both the goal and limits of Coleridge's vision.

## Notes

1. R. Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Gotha, 1929), 214.
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Defence for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism* (London, 1943), 9ff.
3. See my “Coleridge's Speculative Mysticism,” *Heythrop Journal*, 35 (1994), 421-39, and Mary Anne Perkins's reply in *ibid.*, 36 (1995), 202-3.
4. E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II 2 qu. 180, a 3.
5. “Das Speculative” consists in “Dialektischen ... und damit im Fassen des Entgegen-gesetzten in seiner Einheit oder des Positiven im Negativen.” *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Leipzig, 1951), I, 38.
6. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt, 1996); W. Schulz, *Der Gott der neuzeitlichen Metaphysik* (Pfullingen, 1957); W. Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt, 1980), 145-75.
7. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London, 1989), 145.
8. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lay Sermons* (Princeton, 1972), 90.
9. See the discussion of Coleridge's Christology in Graham Davidson, *Coleridge's Career* (London, 1990), 152-79.
10. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks: Text* (London, 1957), I §189.
11. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks: Notes* (London, 1957), I §189.
12. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford, 1956), I §209.
13. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Princeton, 1983), II, 14.
14. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London, 1947), 7ff (on sublimity).
15. Coleridge, *Notebooks: Text*, I §191.
16. Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, I §156.
17. John Everard (1581-1641), undergraduate at Clare College, Cambridge, produced the first translations of Cusa into English, and possibly the influential translation of *De visione Dei* published in 1646 by Giles Randall. Cf. Rufus Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1914), 256, and Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed* (Oxford, 1989), 107-43.
18. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Literary Remains* (London, 1836), I, 189.
19. Viktor Zmegac, *Der Europäische Roman* (Tübingen, 1991); Kurt Otten, *Der Englische Roman vom 16. zum 19. Jh.* (Berlin, 1970).
20. *Die Christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft* (Tübingen, 1840), 1-72.
21. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Friend* (London, 1969), I, 524.
22. See Michael Franz, *Schellings Tübinger Platonstudien* (Göttingen, 1996), and J. Engel, “Coleridge and German Idealism: First Postulates, Final Causes,” *The Coleridge Connection*, ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (London, 1990), 153-77.
23. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. John Beer (London, 1986), 168.
24. See Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 163.
25. Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, I, 394.
26. Elinor Shaffer, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem* (Cambridge, 1975), 96-144.

27. Cf. Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament* (London, 1987), 233-45; and Barker, *The Lost Prophet* (London, 1988).
28. John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London, 1959), 125.
29. Coleridge, *Poems*, 167.
30. *Ibid.*, 168.
31. Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Christianity* (London, 1982); M. Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (London, 1991).
32. Nichols of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, tr. Jasper Hopkins as *Nichols of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism* (Minneapolis, 1985).
33. Central passages are: Augustine, *Confessions* (London, 1961), VII, 10; *City of God* (London, 1984), XXII, 29. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (New York, 1978), I §58, II §178. See also D. J. O'Meara, "Eriugena and Thomas Aquinas on beatific vision," in *Eriugena Redivivus Zur Wirkungsgeschichte seines Denkens im Mittelalter und im Übergang zur Neuzeit, in Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil-hist. Klasse 1986*, ed. W. Beierwaltes (Heidelberg, 1987), 214ff.
34. *Biographia Literaria*, I, 114-15.
35. Nicholas of Cusa, *Triologus de posset*, in Jasper Hopkins, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis, 1978), §18, 19.
36. Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz*, 145-75.
37. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* (1825; London, 1994), 11.
38. *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem*, 54.
39. David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen, 1835), 664: "[M]it Achtung vor jeder Religion erfüllt: und namentlich des Inhalts der höchsten Religion, der Christlichen, als identisch mit der höchsten philosophischen Wahrheit sich bewusst. ..."
40. "Dass in der HEGEL'schen Schule stricter Observanz das Christenthum als die Religion der Einheit des Göttlichen und Menschlichen bestimmt wird, ist bekannt. ... Die Grundidee des Christenthums ist die der Versöhnung, d.h. der Aufhebung des Hüben und Drüben der Intellectualwelt und der Sinnenwelt. ..." *Die Christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft* (Tübingen, 1840), 25.
41. *Das Leben Jesu*, 710.
42. *Collected Notes*, III §3594
43. *Die Christliche Glaubenslehre*, 26.
44. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia* (Princeton, 1992), III, 531.
45. Coleridge, *loc.cit.*
46. *Marginalia*, III, 616.
47. *Ibid.*, 616-17.
48. Plotinus, *Treatise*, tr. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), V, 6, 26ff.
49. See my article "Pantheism, Trinitarian Theism and the Idea of Unity: Reflections on the Christian Concept of God," *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), 61-77.
50. Plotinus, *Treatise* V, 3, 15, 23; VI, 7, 32, 9ff; V, 2, 1, 1f; V, 5, 13, 35.
51. *Treatise*, III, 8, 9, 40.
52. *Treatise*, VI, 9, 3, 49-54.
53. *Treatise*, III, 8, 10, 22; V, 3, 13, 35f.
54. *Treatise*, VI, 7, 32, 12f; III, 8, 9, 54. Cf. Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz*, 26.
55. Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-Other: A Translation and an Appraisal of de li non aliud* (Minneapolis, 1979).
56. Nicholas of Cusa, *De genesi, Werke*, ed. Paul Wilpert (Berlin, 1967), I, 203.
57. *Notebooks*, I § 1379.
58. *De Visione Dei* in *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism*, 175: "Your creating and, likewise, being created are not other than Your imparting Your being to all things, so that in all things You are all things, while remaining free of them all" (*maneat absolutus*).

59. *Notebooks*, III §4326.
60. *Notebooks*, II §2223.
61. Cf. Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz*, 210.
62. Their interest in Neoplatonism is a common factor. Thomas Jackson is a historical link between Nicholas of Cusa and Coleridge. See Sarah Hutton, "Thomas Jackson, Oxford Platonist, and William Twisse, Aristotelian," *JHI* [Journal of the History of Ideas], 34 (1978), 635-52.
63. *Notebooks*, I §1379.
64. *Notebooks*, II §2793.
65. *Aids to Reflection*, 233.
66. Coleridge, *Poems*, 165.
67. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (Princeton, 1976), 117.
68. *Religious Musings*, Coleridge, *Poems* (London, 1986), 75.
69. *Aids to Reflection*, 407. Cf. *Collected Letters*, VI, 1600: "this phantom world."
70. *Marginalia*, III, 521.
71. Plato, *The Republic* 509b, tr. Desmond Lee (London, 1987), 309; Plotinus, *Treatise* VI, 8, 9, 29; VI, 8, 16, 34.
72. *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem*, 54.
73. The Neoplatonists developed Plato's interest in the philosophic myth; see J. Pépin, "Plotin et les Mythes," *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, 53 (1955), 5-27; J. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists* (Leiden, 1976).
74. *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem*, 85.
75. *Aids to Reflection*, 9.
76. F. Uehlein, *Die Manifestation des Selbstbewusstseins im konkreten Ich Bin* (Hamburg, 1982), 94-131.
77. *Aids to Reflection*, 233.
78. *Biographia Literaria*, I, 156.
79. *Biographia Literaria*, I, 191.
80. *Lay Sermons*, 24.
81. *Friend*, I, 524.
82. Patristic theology employed the image of the garden-city as a symbol of the Church and the monastery. Significant here is the Patristic interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, 4:12: "A garden enclosed is my sister spouse." See G. H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York, 1962), 30-45. Medieval visions of paradise tend to describe a city on a mountain with a park within outer walls, and the depictions of paradise are largely of a walled city. See Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, 1988), 69-94; and Ulrich Simon, *Heaven in the Christian Tradition* (London, 1958) and *The Ascent to Heaven* (London, 1961).
83. Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, III §769, 216.
84. *Aids to Reflection*, 344.
85. *Aids to Reflection*, 390-93.
86. *Aids to Reflection*, 393.
87. *Aids to Reflection*, 383.
88. Coleridge refers to his favorites, Bacon and Plato, as "mystics," i.e., as meditating upon the (Divine) ideas. See *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, 165.

I wish to thank Margaret Barker; Professor John Beer; Robert Murray, S. J.; Professor Werner Beierwaltes, Professor Jan Rohls, Dr. Barbara von Wulffen, Sister Mary Charles Murray, and an anonymous reader for the *JHI*.

## Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism): Further Reading

## CRITICISM

Bate, Jonathan. "'Kubla Khan' and 'At a Solemn Music.'" *English Language Notes* 24, No. 1 (1986): 71-73.

*Explains some Miltonic parallels in "Kubla Khan."*

Benzon, William. "Articulate Vision: A Structuralist Reading of 'Kubla Khan'." *Language and Style* 18, No. 1 (Winter 1985): 3-29.

*A structuralist interpretation of "Kubla Khan."*

Colombo, Claire Miller. "Reading Scripture, Writing Self: Coleridge's Animation of the 'Dead Letter.'" *Studies in Romanticism* 35, No. 1 (Spring 1996): 27-53.

*Readings of "The Eolian Harp" and "Kubla Khan," both proposing that Coleridge considered the poetic form a derivative of the sculptural form.*

De Paolo, Charles. "Coleridge and the Cities of the Khan." *Wordsworth Circle* 14, No. 2 (Spring 1983): 83-87.

*Traces Coleridge's description of Xanadu in "Kubla Khan" to Purchas's description of the city of Xamdu.*

Drew, John. "'Kubla Khan' and Orientalism." *Coleridge's Visionary Languages*, edited by Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley, pp. 41-48. Cambridge: Brewer, 1993.

*A reading of "Kubla Khan" as an Orientalist poem.*

Hamilton, Paul. "Plagiarism with a Difference: Subjectivity in 'Kubla Khan' and *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*." *Beyond Romanticism: New Approaches to Texts and Contexts, 1780-1832*, edited by Stephen Copley and John Whale, pp. 140-59. London: Routledge, 1992.

*Explains the connections between Mary Wollstonecraft's A Short Residence and "Kubla Khan."*

Huhn, Peter. "Outwitting Self-Consciousness: Self-Reference and Paradox in Three Romantic Poems." *English Studies* 72, No. 3 (March 1991): 230-45.

*Describes the role and effect of self-conscious composition in three Romantic poems, including "Kubla Khan."*

Levy, Martin J. "Coleridge, Mary Robinson and 'Kubla Khan.'" *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, No. 77 (January 1992): 155-56.

*Traces the relationship between Coleridge and Mary Robinson, focusing on the latter's connection with "Kubla Khan."*

Lorrah, Jean. "The Shamanistic Vision in Fantastic Poetry." *The Scope of the Fantastic—Culture, Biography, Themes, Children's Literature*, edited by Robert A. Collins and Howard D. Pearce, pp. 199-204. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985.

*Analyzes shamanistic visions in various poems, including "Kubla Khan."*

Skarda, Patricia L. "Teaching the Fragment: *Christabel* and 'Kubla Khan.'" *Approaches to Teaching Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Richard E. Matlak, pp. 134-66. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1991.

*Details student responses to two of Coleridge's best known works, tracing their evolution from inception to publication.*

Stillinger, Jack. "The Plots of Romantic Poetry." *College Literature* 15, No. 3, (1988): 208-23.

*Examines various Romantic poems, including "Kubla Khan," as works of fiction.*

Ting, Nai-Tung. "From Shangtu to Xanadu." *Studies in Romanticism* 23, No. 2 (Summer 1984): 205-22.

*Compares Coleridge's descriptions of Xanadu in "Kubla Khan" to the city of Shangtu, the historical Mongol summer capital.*

Additional coverage of Coleridge's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vols. 93 and 107; *DISCovering Authors*; *DISCovering Authors: British*; *DISCovering Authors: Canadian*; *DISCovering Authors Modules: Most-studied Authors and Poets*; *DISCovering Authors 3.0*; *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 11; *Poetry for Students*, Vols. 4 and 5; and *World Literature Criticism*.

## **Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Poetry Criticism): Introduction**

### **"Kubla Khan" Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

The following entry presents criticism of Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" (1816). See also, Samuel Taylor Coleridge Criticism.

An image-laden lyric that evokes romanticized Oriental landscapes, "Kubla Khan" is—along with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) and "Christabel" (1816)—widely acclaimed as one of Coleridge's most significant works. While Coleridge himself referred to "Kubla Khan" as a fragment, the vivid images contained in the poem have garnered extensive critical attention through the years, and it has long been acknowledged as a verse representation of Coleridge's theories of the imagination and creation. Although it was not published until 1816, scholars agree that the work was composed between 1797 and 1800. At the time of its publication, Coleridge subtitled it "A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment" and added a prefatory note explaining its unusual origin. The poet remarked that after taking some opium for medication, he grew drowsy while reading a passage from Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimage*, concerning the court of Kubla Khan. In his semi-conscious state, Coleridge composed a few hundred lines of poetry, and when he awoke, immediately began writing the verses down. Unfortunately, a visitor interrupted him, and when the poet had a chance to return to his writing, the images had fled, leaving him with only vague recollections and the remaining 54 lines of his unfinished poem. While a number of critics have since challenged Coleridge's version of the poem's composition, critical scholarship on "Kubla Khan" has frequently focused on the fragmentary nature and dreamlike imagery of the work, which is considered demonstrative of Romantic poetic theory.

### **Plot and Major Characters**

The poem begins with a description of a magnificent palace built by the Mongolian ruler Kubla Khan during the thirteenth century. The enormous "pleasure-dome" of the poem's first few lines reflects the Khan's

sovereign power, and the description of the palace and its surroundings convey the grandiosity and imperiousness of his character. In contrast to the structured dome and its gardens, the landscape surrounding Kubla's domain is wild and untamed, covered by ancient forests and cut by a majestic river. While it initially appears that harmony and cohesion exist between these two worlds, the narrator then describes a deep crack in the earth, hidden under a grove of dense trees. In the second stanza, the tenor of the poem shifts from the balance and tranquility in the first few lines to an uneasy suggestion of the preternatural. A woman calls to her daemonic lover and the Khan hearkens to “Ancestral voices prophesying war.” Soon, the vast distance between the ordered domain of Kubla's palace and the savagery of nature—the source of the fountain that feeds the river flowing through the rocks, forests, and ultimately, the stately garden of Kubla Khan—becomes apparent. As the river moves from the deep, uncontrolled chasm of the earlier lines back into Kubla's world, the narrative shifts from third to first person. Afterwards, the poet relates his vision of a dulcimer-playing Abyssinian maiden and recounts the sense of power that exudes from successful poetic creation.

## Major Themes

Despite the plentiful criticism it has elicited, most assessments of “Kubla Khan” remain unable to answer with any degree of certainty the question of the poem's ultimate meaning. In part due to its status as a verse fragment and the continued controversy surrounding its origins, “Kubla Khan” has tended to discourage final interpretation. Nevertheless, most critics acknowledge that the juxtaposed images, motifs, and ideas explored in the poem are strongly representative of Romantic poetry. As such, critics have found numerous indications of a thematic reconciliation of opposites in the poem. Similarly, “Kubla Khan” is thought to be principally concerned with the nature and dialectical process of poetic creation. The work is dominated by a lyrical representation of landscape—a common feature of Romantic poetry, in which landscape is typically viewed as the symbolic source and keeper of the poetic imagination. Guided by Coleridge's complex rhyming and metrical structure, “Kubla Khan” first describes the ordered world of Kubla's palace and then—with an abrupt change in meter and rhyme immediately following—depicts the surrounding natural world that the Khan cannot control, even as it provides the foundation of his power. This pattern of contrast between worlds continues throughout the poem, lending it both a purpose and structure that, critics suggest, represents Coleridge's ideal of a harmonious blend of meaning and form in poetic art.

## Critical Reception

When Coleridge first issued “Kubla Khan” in 1816, it is believed that he did so for financial reasons and as an appendage to the more substantial “Christabel.” The work had previously been excluded by William Wordsworth from the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* and there is little evidence that Coleridge himself claimed it as one of his more significant compositions. When first published, many contemporary reviewers regarded the apparent poetic fragment as “nonsense” or “below criticism.” In the years since, the poem and the story of its creation have been widely analyzed, and much critical scholarship has concentrated on the sources of the work's evocative images. Pivotal among these works of criticism is John Livingston Lowes's pioneering *The Road to Xanadu*. The 1927 book-length study—devoted solely to “Kubla Khan”—details the poem's symbolic imagery based upon Coleridge's own readings of travelogues and other works. Although the limitations of this critical method have since been widely acknowledged, *The Road to Xanadu* continues to be a watershed in criticism of the poem and has done much to elevate the work's reputation as a subject for scholarly inquiry. More recent interpretations of the poem have explored both its fragmentary nature and the harmonious vision of poetic theory it proposes. Other estimations have focused on “Kubla Khan” as a poem that relates the account of its own creation, thus stressing its tendency to foreground itself as a work of Romantic art. Overall, “Kubla Khan” is widely acknowledged as a technically complex poem that reflects many of its author's poetic and creative philosophies. Despite its ostensible incompleteness, the work's thematic texture, intricate rhymes, and carefully juxtaposed images are thought to coalesce into a harmonious whole that encapsulates Coleridge's subsequently expressed ideas of poetic composition.

# Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Poetry Criticism): Principal Works

*\*Poems on Various Subjects* [with Robert Southey and Charles Lamb] 1796

*Ode on the Departing Year* 1797

*Fears in Solitude, Written in 1798 During the Alarm of an Invasion. To Which are Added, France, an Ode; and Frost at Midnight* 1798

*Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* [with William Wordsworth] 1798

*Christabel; Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep* 1816

*Sibylline Leaves: A Collection of Poems* 1817

*The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.* 3 vols. 1828

*The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.* 2 vols. 1912

*The Fall of Robespierre. An Historic Drama* [act 1 by Coleridge, acts 2 and 3 by Robert Southey] (play) 1794

*Osorio* [revised as *Remorse. A Tragedy, in Five Acts* in 1813] (play) 1797

*Wallenstein* [translator; from the plays *Die piccolomini* and *Wallensteins Tod* by Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller] (play) 1800

*The Statesman's Manual; or, The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon* (essays) 1816

*Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (essays) 1817

*Zapolya: A Christmas Tale in Two Parts* (play) 1817

*Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character on the Several Grounds of Prudence, Morality, and Religion: Illustrated by Select Passages from Our Elder Divines, Especially from Archbishop Leighton* (essays) 1825

*On the Constitution of Church and State, according to the Idea of Each: with Aids toward a Right Judgment on the late Catholic Bill* (essays) 1830

*Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge.* 2 vols. (conversations) 1835

*The Literary Remains in Prose and Verse of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.* 4 vols. (poetry, plays, and essays) 1836-39

*Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare and Some of the Old Poets and Dramatists With Other Literary Remains* (lectures) 1849

*The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.* 7 vols. (poetry, plays, essays, and translations) 1853

*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 6 vols. (letters) 1956-71

*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 4 vols. (notebooks) 1957-73

*The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 13 vols. (poetry, plays, essays, translations, and lectures) 1969-

\*This work was revised and enlarged as *Poems* in 1797 and revised again in 1803.

## Criticism: Augustan Review (review date 1816)

SOURCE: Review of *Christabel; Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, edited by J. R. de J. Jackson, p. 226. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970.

[In the following excerpt originally published in the *Augustan Review* in 1816, the unsigned reviewer remarks on Coleridge's ostensible dream composition of "Kubla Khan" and decries the lack of poetic merit in this "psychological curiosity."]

It is said of Milton, that often when he awoke from a night's repose, he would write down to the amount of twenty or thirty verses, inspired during the night. But, this, it seems, is nothing to the liberality of Mr. Coleridge's muse, who, in the short space of three hours, brought, not a train of poetical ideas, to be afterwards embodied in appropriate verse, but a corps of well-appointed able-bodied lines, ready, without further training or discipline, for the service of Messrs. Bulmer and Co., Cleveland-Row. Mr. C. tells us, that the few lines (about fifty) which the intrusions of the man of business left him, "are published rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits." But it was poetry, and not psychology, which the public were likely to expect from him; and his vision, with all its concomitants and consequences, might have been suppressed without any public detriment. There seems to be no great harm in dreaming while one sleeps; but an author really should not thus dream while he is awake, and writing too.

The lines in this *psychological curiosity*, descriptive of the palace and garden of Kubla Khan, although somewhat in the style of the "Song by a Person of Quality" [Swift's parody, 'Flutt'ring spread thy purple pinions'], have much of Oriental richness and harmony.

## Criticism: Scourge and Satirist (review date 1816)

SOURCE: Review of *Christabel; Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, edited by J. R. de J. Jackson, pp. 273-77. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970.

[In the following excerpted review originally published in *Scourge and Satirist* in 1816, the unsigned critic launches a diatribe against Coleridge's eccentric literary sensibility occasioned by the poet's offering of "Kubla Khan" as a fragmentary dream vision.]

If [the poetic lines of "Christabel"] be the effusions of Mr. Coleridge's waking faculties, what must be expected from the fragment of "Kubla Khan," a production conceived, arranged, and finished in his sleep. He informs us that in the summer of the year 1797, being then in ill health, he had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair, at the moment when he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas's *Pilgrimage*. "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built and a stately garden thereunto. And thus



ten miles of fertile ground were enclosed with a wall.” Mr. Coleridge continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has “the most vivid confidence that he could not have composed less than from two or three hundred lines: if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions without any sensation or consciousness of effort.” On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this eventful and ever to be lamented moment, he was unfortunately called out by a person on business (*business, indeed! when poetry is in the way*) and this person detained him above an hour. On his return to his room he found to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purpose of the vision, yet with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the reflections on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, “but, alas! without the restoration of the latter.” The account above given is but a poor excuse for obtruding on the public a hasty and unintelligible performance, which atones by no striking and pre-eminent beauty for its imperfection as a fragment. If Mr. Coleridge have neither the talent, the industry, nor the inclination to finish his performances, and to render them consistent and interesting in a connected fable, he should confine them to his escritoire till he acquires the energy and the determination to please, which can alone excuse his repeated appeals to the notice of the public. By publishing his hasty and imperfect fragments, he evidently implies that their excellence, trifling as they are, is sufficient to atone for the absence of arrangement, of an interesting and consistent fable, and the sustained portraiture of well drawn characters acting and thinking in their appropriate spheres and with their appropriate peculiarities through a long series of trials and vicissitudes. As it is, these fragments display neither fable, incident, nor character, and the diction, the metre, and the imagery, possess no excellence that will atone for these defects. Yet that we may not be accused by Mr. Coleridge of doing wilful injustice to his merits, we shall insert his own apology for writing as he lists.

A little child, a limber elf,  
Singing, dancing to itself,  
A fairy thing with red round cheeks,  
That always finds, and never seeks,  
Makes such a vision to the sight,  
As fills a father's eyes with light,  
And pleasures flow in so thick and fast,  
Upon his heart that he at last,  
Must needs express his love's excess,  
With words of unmeant bitterness.  
Perhaps 'tis pretty to force together,  
Thoughts so all unlike each other:  
To mutter and smack a broken charm  
To dally with wrong that does no harm,  
Perhaps 'tis tender too, and pretty,  
    At each wild word to feel within  
A sweet revival of love and pity.  
    And what if in a world of sin  
(Oh sorrow and shame if this be true!)  
    Such giddiness of heart and brain  
    Comes seldom save from rage and pain,  
So talks as it's most used to do.

The querulous sensibility of Mr. Coleridge, and of many of his brethren, presents an additional proof that the *genus irritabile vatum*, retain even in this philosophical and cultivated age their wonted misanthropy and impatience of temper. Yet it might at first sight be supposed by those who are engaged in the bustle of business, exposed to the dangers of war, or involved in the mazes of political intrigue, that the habits and pursuits of a gentleman author are peculiarly favorable to content of mind, and to the repose of all the afflicting passions. What, indeed, on a superficial view, can raise the admiration and envy of the brave and the busy higher than the contemplation of individuals who receive the laurels of honor without being exposed to

hazards, or to personal inconvenience; who rise to eminence without danger, and almost without exertion; and in solitude and comparative idleness, receive those rewards which are seldom attained by the rest of the human race without the most arduous exertions, and at the risk of life.

If any one has been deceived by these two plausible delusions into a belief that such gentlemen as Messrs. Coleridge and Rogers are the happiest of mankind, let him peruse the restless and impatient tone with which the author of “*Christabel*” records his own suspense of animation, and appeals to the good-nature of the public. He has found that the profession (if we may so express it) of a gentleman author, like all others, when tried, fails to yield that satisfaction, or that happiness which it promises. Those who pursue it find unexpected obstacles present themselves to sight, and no sooner are they conquered than new ones rise to view, which become the precursor of others: like many of those who at first set forward with enthusiasm, grow tired of their journey, and descend from the eminence they have in part attained, disappointed in their hopes, and wearied by their labour. Of those who have entered the republic of literature with the hope of admiration, or even the expectation of moderate praise, few have had their hopes gratified or fulfilled by ultimate success. The irritability always attending on poetical genius, produces a morbid sentiment of despondency in the most successful of these literary adventures; and the slightest censure of contemporary criticism, effaces the exulting sentiments occasioned by legitimate eulogy. He who ventures into the lists of learning has undertaken an enterprise of which the reward depends upon the caprices of mankind; and the minds and feelings of the votaries of the muse are so unfortunately constituted that they are always more sensitively alive to censure than to praise. The merit of a book is to some men but a cause for its author being attacked: every effect of opposition and every artifice of cunning is used by his enemies to decrease the estimation of that man, whose excellence has rendered him worthy of their envy, and every principle of false criticism is employed to censure that work which cannot be rivalled. He who hopes by his labours to transmit his name to posterity, must expect the commendation of the literary world to bear no proportion to its censure. It may be doubted whether if Milton had been able to foresee with what obstinacy of argument, and perseverance of repetition, even by those who professed to honor him, he would have been branded with the titles of a promoter of rebellion and an abettor of sedition, he would have thought these reproaches sufficiently compensated for by a crown of Parnassian laurels; and whether if Johnson could have prophesied the malignant hostility of recent critics, he would not have resigned all claim to the title of lexicographer, and on his pittance of fourpence halfpenny a day, to waste his life in solitary penury, unknown to the learned, unreverenced by the good. The very officiousness, however, and austerity of criticism, should be regarded by such men as Mr. Coleridge as the strongest stimulus to the cultivation of poetical taste and to the most strenuous mental exertion. If the most elaborate excellence, and the most arduous efforts will not secure the poet from attack, what hope of mercy can he expect who produces after the lapse of nineteen years, a fragment of forty-eight widely printed pages, absurdly designed and feebly executed. His ascription of his negligence to rage and pain, can only excite a smile in the friends by whom his talents and virtues are most respected and admired. Of all men in existence, he has least experienced the vicissitudes of life, and had the least temptation to indulgence in the violent passages. The pangs of jealousy, the lust of gain, the bitterness of revenge, have never, we are convinced, agitated his bosom, or invaded his peaceful habitation. Yet in the midst innumerable blessings, he exhibits a morbid sensibility of mind, and a determination to be unhappy, at once distressing and ridiculous. ...

## Criticism: Thomas Moore (review date 1816)

SOURCE: Moore, Thomas. Review of *Christabel; Kubla Khan, A Vision; The Pains of Sleep*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Edinburgh Review*, 27 (September 1816): 58–67.

[In the following review of “*Kubla Khan*,” originally published in the *Edinburgh Review*, Moore notes the circumstances of the poem's composition and describes its soporific quality.]

'Kubla Khan' is given to the public, it seems, 'at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity'; but whether Lord Byron the praiser of 'the Christabel', or the Laureate, the praiser of Princes,<sup>1</sup> we are not informed. As far as Mr. Coleridge's 'own opinions are concerned', it is published, 'not upon the ground of any poetic merits', but 'as a Psychological Curiosity'! In these opinions of the candid author, we entirely concur; but for this reason we hardly think it was necessary to give the minute detail which the Preface contains, of the circumstances attending its composition. Had the question regarded *Paradise Lost*, or Dryden's 'Ode', we could not have had a more particular account of the circumstances in which it was composed. It was in the year 1797, and in the summer season. Mr. Coleridge was in bad health; the particular disease is not given; but the careful reader will form his own conjectures. He had retired very prudently to a lonely farm house; and whoever would see the place which gave birth to the 'psychological curiosity', may find his way thither without a guide; for it is situated on the confines of Somerset and Devonshire, and on the Exmoor part of the boundary; and it is, moreover, between Porlock and Linton. In that farm house, he had a slight indisposition, and had taken an anodyne which threw him into a deep sleep in his chair (whether after dinner or not he omits to state), 'at the moment that he was reading a sentence in Purchas's Pilgrims', relative to a palace of Kubla Khan. The effects of the anodyne, and the sentence together, were prodigious: they produced the 'curiosity' now before us; for, during his three-hours sleep, Mr. Coleridge 'has the most vivid confidence that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines.' On awaking, he 'instantly and eagerly' wrote down the verses here published; when he was (he says, 'unfortunately') called out by a 'person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour'; and when he returned, the vision was gone. The lines here given smell strongly, it must be owned, of the anodyne; and, but that an under dose of a sedative produces contrary effects, we should inevitably have been lulled by them into forgetfulness of all things. Perhaps a dozen more such lines as the following would reduce the most irritable of critics to a state of inaction.

A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid  
And on her dulcimer she play'd,  
Singing of Mount Abora.  
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,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread:  
For he on honey-dew hath fed, &c. &c.

There is a good deal more altogether as exquisite—and in particular a fine description of a wood, 'ancient as the hills'; and 'folding sunny spots of greenery'! But we suppose this specimen will be sufficient.

*Note*

1. A hit at Southey's changed politics.

## Criticism: Monthly Review (review date 1817)

SOURCE: Review of *Christabel; Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Monthly Review* 82 (January 1817): 22-25.

[In the following excerpted review, the unsigned reviewer describes “Kubla Khan” as “below criticism.”]

The fragment of ‘Kubla Khan’ is declared to have been composed in a dream, and is published as the author wrote it. Allowing every possible accuracy to the statement of Mr. Coleridge, we would yet ask him whether this extraordinary fragment was not rather the effect of rapid and instant composition after he was awake, than of memory immediately recording that which he dreamt when asleep? By what process of consciousness could he distinguish between such composition and such reminiscence? Impressed as his mind was with his interesting dream, and habituated as he is (notwithstanding his accidental cessation from versifying) to the momentary production of verse, will he venture to assert that he did not *compose*, and that he did *remember*, the lines before us? Were they dreamt, or were they spontaneously poured forth instantly after the dream,

Without stop or stay,  
Down the rocky way  
That leads, &c. &c.?

His ‘psychological curiosity’, as he terms it, depends in no slight degree on the establishment of the previous fact which we have mentioned: but the poem itself is below criticism. We would dismiss it with some portentous words of Sir Kenelm Digby, in his observations on Browne’s *Religio Medici*: ‘I have much ado to believe what he speaketh confidently; that he is more beholding to Morpheus for learned and rational as well as pleasing dreams, than to Mercury for smart and facetious conceptions.’ ...

We close the slight publication before us with unmingled regret. The author of *Remorse* may perhaps be able to explain our feeling better than ourselves: but that so much superior genius should be corrupted and debased by so much execrable taste must be a subject of sincere lamentation to every lover of the arts, and to every friend of poetry.

## Criticism: John Livingston Lowes (essay date 1927)

SOURCE: Lowes, John Livingston. “The Sleeping Images.” In *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*, pp. 356-402. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927.

[In the following excerpt from his book-length study of “Kubla Khan,” Lowes accepts Coleridge’s contention that the poem was the product of an unconscious vision, and explicates the work’s dreamlike imagery using evidence of the poet’s reading.]

Coleridge’s own account of the genesis of ‘Kubla Khan’ is as follows. It was first published in 1816, with the poem. [Coleridge later dreamed another poem—this time a quatrain. For his account of it see the Notes.<sup>1</sup>]

In the summer of 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in ‘Purchas’s Pilgrimage’: ‘Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.’ The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this

moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!<sup>2</sup>

That is all we know. The year 1797, as Ernest Hartley Coleridge has clearly shown, is wrong.<sup>3</sup> The one thing which Coleridge seems to have been constitutionally incapable of remembering correctly was a date that concerned himself.<sup>4</sup> The visit to the farm house between Porlock and Linton took place in the early summer of 1798, and 'Kubla Khan,' instead of preceding 'The Ancient Mariner,' closely followed it. That is important, as we shall see.

For 'the images [which] rose up before him as *things*,' rose up from somewhere. And our study of 'The Ancient Mariner' has revealed the fact that Coleridge's memory was tenanted by throngs of visual images derived from books. If, then, we can reconstruct, for the moment when Coleridge fell asleep over *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, the elements, even in part, of that subliminal chaos, we shall have taken a long step towards the clarification of our problem. Those elements, on Coleridge's own testimony, were images with the objective distinctness of *things*—the 'ocular spectra,' in a word, of his favorite terminology. But they had, in the first instance (to employ that terminology once more), 'flashed' from *words*. And it is only through those words that we, in our turn, can arrive at them. Our sole hope, accordingly, of reconstituting any portion of the sleeping imagery which at the moment of the dream was susceptible of movement towards the light, lies again in an examination of the books which Coleridge had been reading. And as in the case of 'The Ancient Mariner' that avenue is open. But before we enter on it, I wish to guard against a misunderstanding which may easily arise—the assumption, namely, that the passages which I shall quote are, in themselves and as they stand, the constituents, or even (in the stock sense of the term) the 'sources' of 'Kubla Khan.' They are not that. Their very words, undoubtedly, were now and then remembered. But that is incidental. What they did for Coleridge was to people the twilight realms of consciousness with *images*. And the thing they enable *us* to do is to gain some inkling of what those subliminal 'atomes crochus' were—those mysterious elements out of whose confluences and coalescences suddenly emerged the poem. If, then, in this chapter the poem itself should seem far away, it is because we must, as Drayton has it, 'adventure upon desperate untrodden ways'—must pass, indeed, in very truth

From the presence of the sun,  
Following darkness like a dream.

## I

Most fortunately we know, from Coleridge himself, what it was that struck down into the dark and waked the sleeping images to an intense activity. For he tells us what was before his eyes at the instant when he fell asleep, and the poem begins with the actual words on which his eyes had closed. It would be hard to come closer than that to the point at which waking slips over the verge into sleep. The last conscious impressions had been communicated by these lines:<sup>5</sup>

*In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be removed from place to place. [There is a singular coincidence to which Henri Cordier has called attention in his edition of Yule's *Cathay and the Way Thither*. In a thirteenth century Arabic account of Xandu (Shang-tu), which was not translated into any Occidental language until years after Coleridge had dreamed his dream, occurs this statement:*

The images which first rose up ‘as *things*’ had taken on this correspondent form:

And there, for the moment, we may pause.

For even in the few lines of 'Kubla Khan' which I have quoted are details which by no farthest stretch of fancy can be thought of as implicit in the sentence from the *Pilgrimage*.

The images, for instance, which underlie that startling metamorphosis of Purchas's 'delightful streames' had obviously flashed from other pages than the one which Coleridge was reading when he fell asleep. So, with no less certainty, had most of the vividly distinct and concrete imagery of the remainder of the poem. What the impressions from Purchas had done, in a word, was to summon up other images, and set swift trains of association interweaving. And the enterprise before us now is the attempt to reconstruct in part those evanescent operations, which yet builded of their fleetingness a fabric beside which

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Nor gates of steel so strong.

No mortal can hope to call back all that insubstantial pageant which once moved through a long-vanished dream. Most of it faded on the instant, and left not a rack behind. But some of the elements which streamed together are yet traceable, nor is it impossible even to gather, sometimes, how and why they merged. The sequence, however, in which their coalescences occurred is something which I am not so reckless as to attempt to guess.<sup>8</sup> And so the order which we shall follow in the sequel is simply the order which clarity in setting forth the facts demands.

## II

Let us return to the sentence in *Purchas* which Coleridge was reading. Obviously something else—perhaps even before unconsciousness descended—had flashed back to his memory. For Coleridge knew well not merely *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, but *Purchas His Pilgrimes* too. It was in the third volume of the *Pilgrimes* that he had read of William Barents and of the icefields of the North. And in this same volume was another and more detailed account of Kubla Khan. Whether this parallel account had come back to his memory before or after consciousness lapsed is immaterial; in some form or other it was there. For it betrays its presence. I do not know what edition of the *Pilgrimage* Coleridge was reading. If by any chance he had taken Wordsworth's copy with him to his retreat, he had before him the edition of 1617.<sup>9</sup> In that event the name of Kubla's city as it would meet his eye had the cacophonous form 'Xamdu'—as was also the case if his edition were that of either 1614 or 1626. If, on the other hand, it was the first, of 1613, the form he saw was 'Xaindu.' But the name which lends its euphony to the poem's opening line is neither; it is 'Xanadu.' And that is the form which he knew in the *Pilgrimes*, 'Xandu'—now 'unfurled to music suddenly.'

At or after the moment, then, when Coleridge fell asleep, recollections of the *Pilgrimes* had been stirred to life by the reading of the *Pilgrimage*. Anything else, indeed, when (as here) the two narratives ran parallel, would have been, even disregarding 'Xanadu,' well nigh incredible. Let us see what that involves. In the account of Xamdu (or Xaindu) which Coleridge was reading in the *Pilgrimage* was a 'house of pleasure,' in the midst of 'fertile Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightful Streames.' But in the *Pilgrimes*, in the marginal gloss to the parallel account of Kubla's palace, was a 'house of pleasure' too. And just eight pages before this remembered account of Xandu in the *Pilgrimes* is one of the most unforgettable passages in the book. And in it also are 'houses of pleasure,' in the midst of 'a goodly Garden, furnished with the best trees and fruits.' There was, then, between the two narratives a palpable associative link. What happened?

The passage in the *Pilgrimes* is the famous account of the Old Man of the Mountain. [Of which, indeed, as a further link, Coleridge may have just been reading a briefer version only forty pages earlier in the *Pilgrimage*.<sup>10</sup>] I shall first quote a couple of sentences from the beginning of it:

His name was Aloadine, and was a Mahumetan. Hee had in a goodly Valley betwixt two Mountaynes very high, made a *goodly Garden, furnished with the best trees* and fruits he could find, adorned with divers Palaces and *houses of pleasure*, beautified with gold Workes, Pictures, and Furnitures of silke.<sup>11</sup>

That the sentence which Coleridge read in the *Pilgrimage* brought back this definitely linked passage in the *Pilgrimes*, and that the images which rose up from the two of them blended in the dream, it is difficult to doubt. The 'fertile Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightful Streames' and the 'goodly Garden, furnished with the best trees' have slipped together, like Martens's snow and Father Bourzes's rainbow in the spray, into an exquisitely lucid whole compact of both—and, as we shall see, of something else:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree.

But the spell of the Old Man of the Mountain was more potent far than that. And its presence now becomes unmistakable.

For now I shall take up again the account of Aloadine's house of pleasure at the exact point where I broke it off, and shall then set down at once the wonderful last paragraph of 'Kubla Khan.' What gave Coleridge the two vivid figures—the damsel with a dulcimer and the youth with flashing eyes and floating hair—who appear in the poem out of nothing, with a dreamlike suddenness and a dream's serene oblivion of their inconsequence? Here, at all events, are the inmates of Aloadine's Paradise:

There by divers Pipes answering divers parts of those Palaces were seene to runne Wine, Milke, Honey, and cleere Water. In them hee had placed goodly *Damosels skilfull in Songs and Instruments of Musicke* and Dancing, and to make Sports and Delights unto men whatsoever they could imagine. They were also fairely attyred in Gold and Silke, and were seene to goe continually sporting in the Garden and Palaces. He made this Palace, *because Mahomet had promised such a sensuall Paradise to his devout followers* ...

Aloadine had *certaine Youthes* from twelve to twentie yeares of age, such as seemed of a bold and undoubted disposition, *whom hee instructed daily touching Mahomets Paradise*, and how hee could bring men thither. And when he thought good, *he caused a certaine Drinke to bee given unto ten or twelve of them*, which cast them in a dead sleepe: and then hee caused them to be carryed into divers Chambers of the said Palaces, *where they saw the things aforesaid* as soone as they awaked: *each of them having those Damosels to minister Meates and excellent Drinkes*, and all varieties of pleasures to them; *insomuch that the Fooles thought themselves in Paradise indeed*. When they had enjoyed those pleasures foure or five dayes, they were againe cast in a sleepe, and carryed forth againe. After which, hee ... questioned where they had beene, which answered, by your Grace, *in Paradise*. ... Then the old man answered, This is the commandement of our Prophet, that *whosoever defends his Lord, he make him enter Paradise*: and if thou wilt bee obedient to mee, thou shalt have this grace. And having thus animated them, *hee was thought happie whom the old man would command, though it cost him his life: so that other Lords and his Enemies were slaine by these his Assasines, which exposed themselves to all dangers, and contemned their lives*.<sup>12</sup>

Now let us return to the poem:

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.  
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,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.



There can be little question of what has happened. Behind the strange and haunting beauty of the dream's imagery recollected fragments of the striking picture of the pleasure-houses flash and fade and cross and interweave: 'goodly Damosels' with 'Songs and Instruments of Musicke,' seen between sleep and sleep; the milk and honey of Paradise, drunk and eaten at the singing, playing damsels' hands; the desire on waking out of sleep to live again the lost delights ('Could I revive within me Her symphony and song'); the duped inmates of the palace, fired, that so they may regain a Paradise once tasted and now withdrawn, with a fanatic zeal to kill:

And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair! ...  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

They are at once the same and not the same, as you and I have known their like to be a hundred times in dreams. Nobody in his waking senses could have fabricated those amazing eighteen lines. For if anything ever bore the infallible marks of authenticity it is that dissolving panorama in which fugitive hints of Aloadine's Paradise succeed each other with the vivid incoherence, and the illusion of natural and expected sequence, and the sense of an identity that yet is not identity, which are the distinctive attributes of dreams. Coleridge's statement of his experience has more than once been called in question. These lines alone, in their relation to the passage which suggested them, should banish doubt.<sup>13</sup>

Whence, however, slipped into the dream—like journeying stars which enter unannounced—Abyssinia, and Mount Abora, and the dome in air, and the caves of ice, and Alph the sacred river with its caverns and its sunless sea? They are all, I think, distinctly traceable. But to reach them we must first meander with a mazy motion through regions already traversed in our earlier quest.

### III

Is it possible to repeople with its vanished images another corner of Coleridge's unconscious mind into which may have flashed those associations which are the stuff of dreams? With the aid of the Note Book I believe it is.

In April, 1798, Coleridge, who had been suffering from an infected tooth, wrote as follows, in a letter to his brother George:

Laudanam gave me repose, not sleep; but you, I believe, know how divine that repose is, *what a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees* in the very heart of a waste of sands!<sup>14</sup>

Now when Coleridge wrote that, he was recalling and echoing, consciously or unconsciously, something else. For in the Note Book (which, as we know, belongs to this same period) appears this memorandum:

—*some wilderness-plot, green and fountainous* and unviolated by Man.<sup>15</sup>

Is it possible to discover what lies behind this note?

The entry is sandwiched in, together with Hartley's tumble and his tears which glittered in the moonlight, between the two parts of the long note on Bartram's crocodiles. That note, in turn, is transcribed from pages 127-30 of Bartram's *Travels*. The next entry in the Note Book is from Bartram's 140th page; the next from pages 161-62; the next from pages 132-33. And on page 157, flanked on one side by our old friends the crocodiles and snake-birds, and on the other by the *Gordonia lasianthus*, stands the following:

I was however induced to ... touch at the enchanting little Isle of Palms. This delightful spot, planted by nature, is almost an entire grove of Palms, with a few pyramidal Magnolias, Live Oaks, golden Orange, and the animating Zanthoxilon; what a beautiful retreat is here! *blessed unviolated spot of earth!* rising from the limpid waters of the lake; its fragrant groves and blooming lawns invested and protected by encircling ranks of the Yucca gloriosa; a fascinating atmosphere surrounds this blissful garden; the balmy Lantana, ambrosial Citra, perfumed Crinum, perspiring their mingled odours, wafted through Zanthoxilon groves. I at last broke away from *the enchanting spot* ... then traversing a capacious semi-circular cove of the lake, verged by low, extensive grassy meadows, I at length by dusk made a safe harbour.

And two pages earlier 'the dew-drops twinkle and play ... on the tips of the lucid, green savanna, sparkling' beside a 'serpentine rivulet, meandering over the meadows.'<sup>16</sup>

Those lines from Bartram, then, are in the very thick of the pages which Coleridge was ardently transcribing in his Note Book, and the picture which they painted made a profound impression on his mind. For he twice came back to it. It inspired the memorandum in the Note Book, for the 'wilderness-plot,<sup>17</sup> green and fountainous and *unviolated* by Man' is unmistakably the 'blessed *unviolated* spot of earth' on which Bartram lavished such a wealth of words. It no less clearly underlies the passage in the letter, whose '*spot of enchantment*' is Bartram's '*enchanting spot*,' and whose 'green spot of fountain' is the 'plot, green and fountainous' of the Note Book. And in the letter it becomes the symbol of the 'divine repose' induced by opium, and the letter was written not more than a month or two before 'Kubla Khan.' Of one thing, then, we may be certain: impressions of Bartram's 'enchanted little Isle of Palms' were among the sleeping images in Coleridge's unconscious memory at the time when 'Kubla Khan' emerged from it.

But a thousand other impressions coexisted with them there. Did this particular cluster constitute what we have called an *atome crochu*? Had it, in other words, hooks and eyes which might draw it into the extraordinary complex which was taking form? If it *were* so equipped, its attraction within the circle was almost inevitable. For it lay, so to speak, just over the threshold of consciousness. Twice already its imagery had recurred to memory and clothed itself with words. And recurrence to memory soon becomes a habit. Conspicuous, now, among its details were 'grassy meadows,' a 'blissful garden,' 'fragrant groves,' and multitudes of trees. And at the moment of the dream, by way of Purchas, impressions of 'fertile Meddowes,' conjoined with a 'goodly Garden' furnished with trees, were stirring actively in Coleridge's brain. Clearly, then, there were sufficient links between the images from Purchas which were sinking into the Well, and the images from Bartram which were already there.

And they *did* coalesce. Here are the lovely lines of the fragment once again:

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.

'As I bent my head,' wrote Coleridge to Godwin in words which I have quoted once before, 'there came a distinct, vivid spectrum upon my eyes; it was one little picture—a rock, with birches and ferns on it, a cottage backed by it, and a small stream. Were I a painter I would give an outward existence to this, *but it will always live in my memory*.'<sup>18</sup> Even so into the dream had come remembered ocular spectra from Bartram—images which rose up before the dreamer 'as *things*.' There were Bartram's '*balmy Lantana, ambrosial Citra, perfumed Crinum, perspiring their mingled odours*.' But the dreamer was Coleridge, not Bartram, and so the mass of particulars melted into a single line, redolent of the odours of all spicy shores: 'Where blossomed *many an incense-bearing tree*.' Into the dream, moreover, had slipped the image of an image of an image—that luminous visualization in the letter (still only a few weeks old) of the same scene as it came up

through the Note Book from Bartram: 'a spot of enchantment, *a green spot* of fountain and flowers and trees.' And so in the dream there are 'forests ancient as the hills, Enfolding sunny *spots of greenery*.' And the '*serpentine rivulet*' meandering through 'the *lucid, green savanna*' sparkling with sunlit dew—that too, merged with another recollection, rose up in the dream as 'one little picture,' to which were fitted, 'without consciousness of effort,' perfect words: 'And there were gardens *bright with sinuous rills*.' Even 'enfolding' is a transmuted flash of memory. For in Bartram's 'enchanted spot' are 'blooming lawns *invested ... by encircling ranks*' of towering flora. And these 'blooming' forest-glades are seen in the blossoming of the incense-bearing trees. Every detail in the four lines which recollections of Purchas leave wanting or incomplete, reminiscences of Bartram have supplied. But neither *Travels*, nor *Pilgrimage*, nor *Pilgrimes*, nor all of them combined, supplied the resultant beauty.

#### IV

We have by no means finished, however, with the Isle of Palms. For the images which rose from Bartram were furnished with still other powerful links. It will be remembered that in the Note Book Bartram's 'blessed unviolated spot of earth' appeared as a 'wilderness-plot, green and *fountainous*,' and that in the letter it reappeared as 'a green spot of *fountain* and flowers and trees.' But there were no fountains in Bartram's Isle of Palms. Yet even before the dream fountains had somehow become fixed in Coleridge's mental picture. How had they entered it?

The account of the Isle of Palms is on Bartram's 157th page. The *Gordonia lasianthus* is on pages 161-62. Coleridge, then, was still intently reading on. And the entry in the Note Book touching the 'Siminoles,' which draws on pages 212-13, and the footnote to 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison,' which quotes verbatim a sentence from page 221,<sup>19</sup> afford ample evidence that he had read still farther. Now on page 165, just three pages beyond the *Gordonia lasianthus*, is this:

I seated myself upon *a swelling green knoll*, at the head of the chrystal bason. Near me, on the left, was a point or projection of an entire grove of the aromatic *Illisium Floridanum*; on my right and all around behind me, was a fruitful *Orange grove*, with *Palms* and *Magnolias* interspersed; in front, just under my feet was the *enchanted and amazing chrystal fountain*.

The fountain and the Isle of Palms are separated by eight pages only, and a passage entered in the Note Book lies between. They may easily have been read at the same sitting, and the associative links between the two—green knoll, aromatic groves, oranges, palms, magnolias—are patent at a glance. At all events, the Note Book and the letter are evidence that before the dream was dreamed the two green and fragrant spots of trees and flowers had coalesced in Coleridge's memory. And into the picture which was later to haunt the dream had been carried the imagery suggested by 'the enchanted ... chrystal fountain.'

Now let us see a little more of this amazing fountain. The account of it proceeds:

Just under my feet was the enchanted and amazing chrystal fountain, *which incessantly threw up, from dark, rocky caverns below, tons of water every minute, forming* a bason, capacious enough for large shallops to ride in, and *a creek* of four or five feet depth of water, and near twenty yards over, *which meanders six miles through green meadows*, pouring its limpid waters into the great Lake George. ... About twenty yards from the upper edge of the bason ... is a *continual and amazing ebullition, where the waters are thrown up in such abundance and amazing force*, as to jet and swell up two or three feet above the common surface: *white sand and small particles of shells are thrown up with the waters ... when they ... subside* with the expanding flood, and gently *sink again*.<sup>20</sup>

That, then, before the dream, Coleridge had seen in his mind's eye. What did he see in the dream?

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.  
 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.

The images which rose up in the dream, in conjunction with 'sunny spots of greenery,' were images which had risen up before, in similar conjunction, when Coleridge, with that preternatural visualizing faculty of his, was eagerly devouring Bartram. They are that beyond the shadow of a doubt. But they are also, as so often happens in a dream, simultaneously something else. That something else must wait its turn, however, since we have still to do with Bartram.

For Bartram was inordinately fond of letting himself go on the subject of ebullient fountains—which were, indeed, in all conscience, remarkable enough.<sup>21</sup> And certain striking details from one or two of these other lively descriptions had fixed themselves in Coleridge's memory. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, who saw so much that has enriched us, missed the 'enchanted and amazing chrystal fountain' which reappears in such startling fashion in the dream.<sup>22</sup> But he calls attention, in a footnote to the lines of 'Kubla Khan' before us, and more fully in a paper read before the Royal Society of Literature in 1906, to 'William Bartram's description of the "Alligator Hole."' <sup>23</sup> Now that description is only seventeen pages beyond the account of the savanna crane, of which Coleridge quotes half a dozen lines,<sup>24</sup> and we may be certain that he read it. And what he read included the story, as told by an eyewitness, of the last eruption from the vast orifice. Here is enough of it to serve our purpose:

On a sudden, he was astonished by an inexpressible rushing noise, like a mighty hurricane or thunder storm, and looking around, he saw the earth overflowed by torrents of water ... *attended with a terrific noise and tremor of the earth.* ... He immediately resolved to proceed for the place from whence the noise seemed to come, and soon came in sight of *the incomparable fountain*, and saw, with amazement, *the floods rushing upwards many feet high*, and the expanding waters ... spreading themselves far and near. ... It continued to *jet* and flow in this manner for several days, *forming a large ... river*, descending and following the various. ... *windings* of the valley, for the distance of seven or eight miles, emptying itself into a vast savanna, where there was a ... *sink which received ... its waters.* ... At places, where ridges or a swelling bank ... opposed its course and fury, are *vast heaps of fragments of rocks*, white chalk, stones and pebbles, *which were ... thrown* into the lateral vallies.<sup>25</sup>

The two descriptions could not but recall each other, and in the dream their images coalesced. The sense of a tremendous force is heightened: the 'white sand and small particles of shells ... thrown up' by 'the enchanted fountain' give place to 'fragments of rocks ... thrown' in vast heaps into the vallies; the 'terrific tremor of the earth' now pulsates through the dream, 'As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing.' But the concourse of the hooked atoms is not yet complete.

Just eight pages earlier Coleridge had read of still another 'grand fountain,' 'the admirable Manate Spring':

The ebullition is astonishing, and continual, *though its greatest force or fury intermits*, regularly, *for the space of thirty seconds of time* ... the ebullition is perpendicular upwards, from a *vast ragged orifice through a bed of rocks ... throwing up small particles or pieces of*

*white shells*, which subside with the waters, at the moment of *intermission* ... yet, before the surface becomes quite even, the fountain vomits up the waters again, and *so on perpetually*.<sup>26</sup>

And so there is added, with fresh emphasis on the ‘*ceaseless* turmoil,’ the suggestion of the ‘*swift half-intermitted* burst.’ The imagery of the ‘mighty fountain’ in the vision is an amazing confluence of images from these separate yet closely linked reports of actual fountains which Coleridge had read.<sup>27</sup> Yet in another sense the confluence is not ‘amazing’; it is the normal mechanism of a dream.<sup>28</sup>

## V

And now among the elements which blended in the panorama appears a train of imagery stranger and more startling than any which has gone before. For through the dream, mysteriously flooding and subsiding, flows ‘the sacred river.’

One of the books most widely read at the close of the century was James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*. And Coleridge knew it well. He made use of it ... in his ‘Religious Musings,’ dated ‘on the Christmas Eve of 1794,’ and in a footnote to the poem he quotes Bruce's graphic description of the Simoom.<sup>29</sup> In 1801 he makes a memorandum of his intention to use, in a comparison after the manner of Jeremy Taylor, the idea of ‘seeking the fountains of the Nile.’<sup>30</sup> And in 1807 he recommends the last edition of the *Travels* to Lady Beaumont as ‘a book that [she] ought by all means to have.’<sup>31</sup> It was no wonder that he did so. Bruce, in Richard Garnett's words, ‘will always remain the poet, and his work the epic, of African travel.’<sup>32</sup> And as the tale of an attempt to penetrate the mystery which had veiled for centuries the sources of the most venerable of all historic streams, the narrative was and is one to stir imagination. Nor should we expect a superb contemporary chapter in the romance of discovery to leave Coleridge's tenacious memory bare of images.

Certainly no one who ever read it would forget the dramatic climax of the story. Bruce, baffled and annoyed by the shifts and evasions of his native guide, lost his temper:

Come, come, said I ... no more words; it is now late, lose no more time, but carry me to Geesh, and the head of the Nile directly, without preamble, and shew me the hill that separates me from it. He then carried me round to the south side of the church, out of the grove of trees that surrounded it. ‘This is the hill, says he, looking archly, that ... was between you and *the fountains of the Nile*; there is no other; look at *that hillock of green sod* in the middle of that watery spot, it is in that the two *fountains of the Nile* are to be found: Geesh is on the face of the rock where *yon green trees* are: if you go the length of the fountains pull off your shoes ... for these people are all Pagans ... and they believe in nothing that you believe, but only in this river, *to which they pray every day as if it were God*.’ ... Half undressed as I was by loss of my sash, and throwing my shoes off, I ran down the hill towards *the little island of green sods*; ... the whole side of the hill was *thick grown over with flowers*, the large bulbous roots of which appearing above the surface of the ground, and their skins coming off on treading upon them, occasioned two very severe falls before I reached the brink of the marsh; I after this came to *the island of green turf*, which was in form of an altar, apparently the work of art, and I stood in rapture over the principal fountain which rises in the middle of it.

It is easier to guess than to describe the situation of my mind at that moment—standing in that spot which had baffled the genius, industry, and inquiry of both ancients and moderns, for the course of near three thousand years.<sup>33</sup>

We need not pursue Bruce's meditation farther; but in that thrilling moment the ‘little island of green sods’ held, both for him and for his readers, the answer to a question older than the riddle of the sphinx. And for two

long chapters this other ‘wilderness-plot, green and fountainous,’ is in the foreground of the narrative.

Now Bruce, in his attempt to prove himself the first European to reach the sources of the Nile, discusses at great length the narrative of Father Peter Paez, who claimed to have discovered the two fountains on April 21, 1618. And he quotes, on the authority of Athanasius Kircher, Paez’s description of the fountains, in which, after declaring that he ‘saw, with the greatest delight [summaque animi mei voluptate], what neither Cyrus king of the Persians, nor Cambyzes, nor Alexander the Great, nor the famous Julius Cæsar, could ever discover,’ he mentions certain striking details which have for us peculiar interest:

The second fountain lies about a stone-cast west from the first: the inhabitants say that *this whole mountain is full of water*, and add, that the whole plain about the fountain is floating and unsteady, a certain mark that there is water concealed under it; for which reason, the water does not overflow at the fountain, but *forces itself with great violence out* at the foot of the mountain. The inhabitants ... maintain that that year it trembled little on account of the drought, but other years, that *it trembled and overflowed so as that it could scarce be approached without danger*.<sup>34</sup>

It would be hard to imagine ‘hooks and eyes of the memory’ more effective than those which link the description of that fountain with the accounts of its congeners in Florida. The ‘hillock of green sod,’ like the ‘swelling green knoll’ by the ‘enchanted fountain’; the hillside ‘thick grown over with flowers’; the plain about the fountain that ‘trembled’; the water that ‘forced itself out with great violence’: every detail recalls some parallel in Bartram. But there is a further correspondence so close as to verge on the uncanny. The Nile, just after it has left the fountain, ‘makes so many sharp, unnatural *windings*, that it differs,’ says Bruce, ‘from any other river I ever saw, making above twenty sharp angular peninsulas *in the course of five miles*.’<sup>35</sup> The stream thrown up by Bartram’s ‘amazing chrystal fountain’ ‘*meanders six miles* through green meadows.’<sup>36</sup> Coleridge being Coleridge, with that prehensile associative faculty of his, it was really the inevitable which happened. ‘*Five miles meandering* with a mazy motion’—so ran the sacred river which the mighty fountain in the dream flung up. And that is Bartram and Bruce in one. The vivid images of fountains in Florida and Abyssinia, with their powerfully ejected streams, have coalesced in the deep Well and risen up together, at once both and neither, in the dream. And by virtue of that incomprehensible juggling with identities which is the most familiar trick of dreams, ‘the sacred river’ *is* the Nile—while at the same time it is *not*. Only in a dream, I once more venture to believe, could the phantasmagoria which now for the first time it is possible to estimate, have risen up.

## VI

And now certain other mysterious features of the dream fall into place. Why was the damsel with a dulcimer ‘an Abyssinian maid’? The answer is not far to seek. The fountains of the sacred river are in Abyssinia; almost from beginning to end the scene of Bruce’s narrative is laid in Abyssinia; and Abyssinia hovered in the background of the vision, to become suddenly explicit in this seemingly unaccountable detail. And for still another instant Abyssinia held the foreground of the dream:

It was an Abyssinian maid,  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.

What was Mount Abora, unknown to any map, I think, since time began?

The account which I have quoted of Bruce’s rapturous plunge down the flowery hillside to the fountains of the Nile is on pages 596-97 of his third volume. Between pages 580 and 588 occurs fifteen times—six times on page 587 alone—a name which has not appeared before. It is that of the river, or valley, or plain of *Abola*.

‘The river Abola’—a tributary of the Nile—‘comes out of the valley between [the] two ridges of mountains of Litchambara and Aformasha,’ which Bruce at once identifies with ‘the Mountains of the Moon, or the *Montes Lunæ* of antiquity, at the foot of which the Nile was said to rise.’<sup>37</sup> No reader of Bruce could reach the story of the fountains of the Nile without ‘Abola’ ringing in his ears. And ‘Abola’ was itself amply sufficient to suggest the dream-word ‘Abora,’ as ‘Xamdu’ or ‘Xaindu’ suggested ‘Xanadu.’<sup>38</sup> But there was another name in Bruce which with little doubt blended in Coleridge’s memory with ‘Abola,’ to bring about the metamorphosis.

Only eight pages beyond Bruce’s account of his thrilling discovery is a description of the island of Meroë: ‘That island ... having a twilight of short duration’ (a remark peculiarly adapted to catch Coleridge’s eye) ‘was placed between the Nile and *Astaboras*.’<sup>39</sup> In the next chapter (still the ‘Description of the Sources of the Nile’) the name turns up repeatedly again. ‘It seems very clear that the *Atbara* is the *Astaboras* of the ancients’; ‘Meroë ... was inclosed between the *Astaboras* and the Nile’; ‘Pliny says, Meroë ... is called *Astaboras*. ... “*Astabores lævo alveo dictus*.”’<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the first appearance of the *Astaboras* in the narrative is not without suggestion: ‘this prodigious body of water ... *tearing up rocks* and large trees in its course, and *forcing down their broken fragments* scattered on its stream, with a noise like thunder echoed from a hundred hills ... is very rightly called the “terrible.”’<sup>41</sup> ‘*Astaboras*,’ then, can scarcely have failed to print itself on Coleridge’s memory, and the accented element of the name is ‘*abora*.’ And the obvious relation between the modern ‘*Atbara*’ and the ancient ‘*Astaboras*’ would serve to fix attention on this central element. Between ‘*Abola*’ and ‘*Astaboras*,’ accordingly, Coleridge’s ‘*Abora*’ seems to have slipped into the dream.<sup>42</sup>

But why should hints from the names of two *rivers* have contributed a *mountain* to the dream? Whatever the suggestion, it doubtless flashed for an instant and was gone, ‘impalpable as the wind, fleeting as the wings of sleep’—*par levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno*. Yet to recapture it (if recapture it we can) we must traverse with heavy feet the labyrinth through which it fled like light. But we have long been doing that.

Some years ago, Professor Lane Cooper suggested, in an article on ‘The Abyssinian Paradise in Coleridge and Milton,’<sup>43</sup> that Coleridge’s ‘Mount Abora’ was really Milton’s ‘Mount Amara.’ In the sense in which ‘the sacred river’ at the same time is and is not the Nile, I think he is right; and in the light of the facts already presented ... his suggestion takes on new significance. Mount Amara closes the bead-roll of those enticing earthly Paradises which Milton, in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost*, sets over against his glowing account of the true Paradise of Eden:

Not that fair field  
Of Enna, where Proserpin gathering flowers,  
Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis  
Was gathered—which cost Ceres all that pain  
To seek her through the world—nor that sweet grove  
Of Daphne, by Orontes and the inspired  
Castalian spring, might with this Paradise  
Of Eden strive ...  
Nor, where Abassin kings their issue guard,  
Mount Amara (though this by some supposed  
True Paradise) under the Ethiop line  
By Nilus’ head, enclosed with shining rock,  
A whole day’s journey high. (44)

No one will doubt that Coleridge, who knew his Milton through and through, and who believed that ‘in the description of Paradise itself ... [Milton’s] descriptive powers are exercised to the utmost,’<sup>45</sup> was thoroughly conversant with the lines on Amara, in their passingly lovely context. Had they, however, associations which might blend some fugitive recollection of them with the dream?<sup>46</sup>

The links are there, not single spies, but in battalions. The setting of Mount Abora in the dream is a flashing stream of reminiscences of that Paradise of the Old Man of the Mountain wherein 'Fooles thought themselves in Paradise indeed'; Milton's Mount Amara is such another pseudo-Paradise, like Aloadine's, 'by some supposed True Paradise.' Through the imagery of the dream ebbs and flows the sacred river, and the sacred river, as we now know, is the Nile; Mount Amara is 'under the Ethiop line By Nilus' head'—those fountains which by way of Bruce flung up the sacred river in the dream. And by way of Bruce Mount Amara itself might have found, together with the fountains, ready entrance. For Bruce writes of Amhara too, as one of the geographical divisions of Abyssinia:

It is a very mountainous country, full of nobility; the men are reckoned the handsomest in Abyssinia, as well as the bravest. ... What, besides, added to the dignity of this province, was the high mountain of Geshen, or the grassy mountain, *whereon the king's sons were formerly imprisoned*.<sup>47</sup>

'Nor, *where Abassin kings their issue guard*, Mount Amara'! It would be hard for Coleridge to read the first without a flash of recollection, on the very threshold of the sacred river, to the second. Into the dream, moreover, had poured the imagery of that enchanting spot in Bartram, where balmy trees 'perspir[ed] their mingled odours'; 'Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm' precede by only thirty lines the Miltonic Amara. And in the '*fertile ground*' of Eden, and its 'many a *rill*' that rolled 'with *mazy* error,' and its river which 'through the shaggy hill *Passed underneath ingulfed*,' are correspondences which compel belief that Milton's Paradise, and with it his Mount Amara, lent fleeting touches to the panorama of the dream.<sup>48</sup> And in that phantasmagoria 'Amara' (well worthy of commemoration in an Abyssinian damsel's symphony and song) has passed, under the spell of sounds more closely associated with the sacred river, through 'Abola' and 'Astaboras,' into 'Abora.' [Mr. Fausset, in his *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1926), pp. 183-84, following, I take it, Professor Cooper (he merely says: 'as a critic has recently pointed out'), enumerates some of these same details.]

All this is enhanced by the further fact (to which Professor Cooper also calls attention)<sup>49</sup> that Purchas has an entire chapter in his *Pilgrimage* entitled 'Of the Hill Amara,'<sup>50</sup> and it was this chapter which inspired Milton's lines. It is one of the most memorable purple patches of the book, and nobody who knew the *Pilgrimage* would be likely to forget it. Coleridge, certainly, in that quest of materials for his 'Hymns to the Sun, Moon, and the Elements' which led him to Maurice and Quintus Curtius, could not well have overlooked it, for on the hill 'there are two Temples, built before the Raigne of the Queene of Saba, one in honour of the Sunne, the other of the Moone, the most magnificent in all Ethiopia.'<sup>51</sup> And its links with the dream are as obvious as Milton's.<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to believe that Coleridge did not know it; and through it, or through both (I think we may be sure), Mount Amara—its name merged with the name of the river that flowed by the Mountains of the Moon—was drawn into that concourse of impressions which, as Coleridge sat sleeping over Purchas, was slipping through the ivory gate.

## VII

I am aware that to some of my readers all this ado about a name will be regarded as the veriest trifling. But I beg such readers to remember that nothing is trivial which contributes to our understanding, on the one hand, of the strange workings of the mind in dreams, and on the other, of the waking operations of the creative faculty. There is not, in my judgment, among all existing records of the human mind, an opportunity of studying the two together which is comparable to that afforded by 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan.' We shall see, I hope, when the materials which it is the formidable business of this ... to elucidate are all before us, that the workings of the dream throw welcome light upon the waking processes. If that be so, no clue is too slight to follow where it leads. And there are more for us to follow.

For still other reminiscences of Bruce seem to have blended with the dream—recollections which



Stream'd onward, lost their edges, and did creep  
Roll'd on each other, rounded, smooth'd, and brought  
Into the gulfs of sleep.

Let me set down in Bruce's words a few glimpses of the Abyssinian landscape caught as the little caravan approached the fountains of the Nile:

The [whole mountain] was covered with thick wood, which often occupied the very edge of the precipices on which we stood. ... Just above this almost impenetrable wood, in a very *romantic* situation, stands St. Michael, in a hollow space like a niche between two hills. ... The Nile here is not four yards over ... [The whole company] were sitting in the shade of *a grove of magnificent cedars*. ... The banks [of the Nile] ... are covered with black, dark, and thick groves ... a very rude and awful face of nature, *a cover* from which our fancy suggested a lion should issue, or some animal or monster yet more *savage* and ferocious. ... 'Strates,' said I, 'be in no such haste; remember the water is *enchanted*.' ... In the middle of this cliff [at Geesh], in a direction straight north towards the fountains, is *a prodigious cave*. ... From the edge of the cliff of Geesh ... *the ground slopes* with a very easy descent due north. ... On the east *the ground descends* likewise with a very easy ... slope. ... From [the] west side of it ... the ascent is very easy and gradual ... all the way covered with good earth, *producing fine grass*.<sup>53</sup>

And here is the landscape of the dream:

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!

Other impressions, to be sure, after the fashion of the sleeping images, have merged in the dream with the ocular spectra which had flashed from Bruce's panoramic pages. But allowing for the wizardry of sleep, the 'deep romantic chasm' of 'the sacred river' is essentially the setting of the fountains of the Nile.

One other picture seems to owe its startling vividness to Bruce. Few images in the dream can have risen up more thrillingly as *things* than that apparition from the 'bewitched enclosure' of Aloadine's Paradise:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

And as one of Aloadine's Tartar damsels becomes, thanks to Bruce, an Abyssinian maid, so, through the same influence, one of Aloadine's fanatic devotees is visualized (it would seem) as an Abyssinian king.

One of the most dramatic scenes in Bruce occurs a few pages after the fountains of the Nile are left behind. Bruce has joined the king of Abyssinia, Tecla Haimanout, who is fighting for his throne. And now the following extraordinary incident takes place:

[The king] had desired me to ride before him, and shew him the horse I had got from Fasil. ... It happened that, crossing the deep bed of a brook, a plant of the kantuffa hung across it. I had upon my shoulders a white goatskin, of which it did not take hold; but the king, who was dressed in the habit of peace, *his long hair floating all around his face*, wrapt up in his mantle, or thin cotton cloak, *so that nothing but his eyes* could be seen, was paying more attention to the horse than to the branch of kantuffa beside him; it took first hold of his hair, and the fold of the cloak that covered his head ... in such a manner that ... no remedy

remained but he must throw off the upper garment, and appear ... with his head and face bare before all the spectators.

This is accounted great disgrace to a king, who always appears covered in public. However, he did not seem to be ruffled ... but with great composure, and in rather a low voice, he called twice, Who is the Shum of this district? Unhappily he was not far off. A thin old man of sixty, and his son about thirty, came trotting, as their custom is, naked to their girdle, and stood before the king. ... The king asked if he was Shum of that place? he answered in the affirmative, and added ... that the other was his son.

There is always near the king, when he marches, an officer called Kanitz Kitzera, the executioner of the camp; he has upon the tore of his saddle a quantity of thongs made of bull's hide ... this is called the *tarade*. The king made a sign with his head, and another with his hand, without speaking, and two loops of the tarade were instantly thrown round the Shum and his son's neck, and they were both hoisted upon the same tree, the tarade cut, and the end made fast to a branch. They were both left hanging. ...<sup>54</sup>

That is not the sort of tale which one forgets. And with images of Tartary and Abyssinia already freely telescoping in the dream, it seems highly probable that some leap of association from Aloadine's assassins called up that sharp-etched picture of the ruthless Abyssinian king whose floating hair precipitated such a tragedy.

And now, with the kaleidoscopic swiftness of a dream, the scene shifts from Abyssinia to Cashmere. But even that surprising shift is not fortuitous. For Abyssinia and Cashmere were linked, for Coleridge, through a circumstance which we have now to see.

## VIII

I said 'for Coleridge,' since Coleridge's associations of ideas are all that count in Coleridge's dream. And among the sleeping images below the threshold of his consciousness there was one of Cashmere which was definitely associated with the Nile. That will be clear, if we turn back to the reading on which Coleridge was intent at the time when he was jotting down matters of interest in Bartram.

In the Note Book, it will be remembered, a few pages after the excerpts from Bartram, appears the following entry:

### Hymns Moon

In a cave in the mountains of Cashmere an Image of Ice, which makes it's appearance thus—two days before the new *moon* there appears a bubble of Ice which increases in size every day till the 15th day, at which it is an ell or more in height: then as the moon decreases, the Image does also till it vanishes.

Read the whole 107th page of Maurice's Indostan.<sup>55</sup>

Coleridge, that is, was collecting materials for his projected 'Hymns to the Sun, the Moon, and the Elements—six hymns,' and was reading Maurice with an eye alert for imagery which he could turn to account in the great work which was never to be.<sup>56</sup> The five mathematicians on the lofty tower in Pekin, who were somehow to enliven the Hymn to Air, he made note of from Maurice,<sup>57</sup> and Maurice, as we shall see in a moment, gave him a hint for the Hymn to the Sun. Lore associated with the Sun, Moon, or the Elements, accordingly, was unlikely at this juncture to escape a treasure-seeker's vigilant eye.

The passage which he first made note of reads, in its context, as follows:

I have already noticed the remarkable circumstance of 360 *fountains* ... *sacred to the moon*, at Kehrah, a town in Cashmere; Cashmere, probably the most early residence of the Brahmins, and the theatre of the purest rites of their theology.

In a cave of the same mountainous subah a very singular phænomenon is said, in the Ayeen Akbery, at certain periods to make its appearance. ... In this cave, says Abul Fazil, is sometimes to be seen an image of ice, called Amernaut, which is holden in great veneration. The image makes its appearance after the following manner—<sup>58</sup>

and the rest is substantially as Coleridge sets it down.<sup>59</sup>

Now the image of ice is on pages 106-07. Keeping in mind the suggestive reference to *fountains*, let us pass to the next entry in the Note Book:

Sun

Hymns—Remember to look at Quintius [*sic*] Curtius—lib. 3. Cap. 3 and 4.<sup>60</sup>

But why? On the page in Maurice (105) immediately preceding the cave with its bubble of ice are these two footnotes:

See Quinti Curtii, lib. 3. cap. 3.  
Ibid. lib. 3. cap. 4.

It was Maurice, then, who was sending Coleridge to Quintus Curtius, and it is easy to see why Coleridge was anxious not to forget to look him up. For Maurice had just given, on the authority of these two passages, two highly picturesque details which were a godsend to a poet with a Hymn to the Sun obstinately hanging fire:

He [Quintus Curtius] declares it to have been an immemorial custom among the Persians, for the army never to march before the rising of the sun; that a trumpet, sounding from the king's pavilion, proclaimed the first appearance of its beam, and that a golden image of its orb, inclosed in a circle of crystal, was then displayed in the front of that pavilion, which diffused so wide a splendour that it was seen through the whole camp. ...

The grooms appointed to train and conduct these horses [one of which was called The Horse of the Sun] ... bore in their hands golden rods, or wands, pointed at the end in imitation of the solar ray.<sup>61</sup>

Coleridge's mind, it is plain, was picking up like a magnet imagery associated with the sun and moon. But (since we are for the moment working backwards) he had just been reading, a couple of pages earlier, a striking account of honours paid to the sun and moon in *Egypt*. And his eye—as quick to take notice as those of any five Chinese astronomers!—would assuredly catch this:

The whole of the annual magnificent festival of Osiris and Isis was in the most pointed manner allusive to the influence of the Sun and Moon upon the earth. ... To the Moon, [The capitals are in Maurice—as are those in the preceding quotations.] or Isis, they were by no means ungrateful for affording, by night, her kindly ray to conduct the mariner ... over the boundless ocean, and the benighted traveller over deserts of sands ... as well as her immediate utility in swelling the waters of *that sacred river*, whose annual inundations were

the perpetual and abundant source of plenty.<sup>62</sup>

And for another page the mutations of the Nile are Maurice's theme.

This, then, is clear. The Nile and Cashmere were definitely connected, through the moon, in Maurice. The Image of Ice, accordingly, in the cave in the mountains of Cashmere, sank below the threshold as an *atome crochu*. And its particular 'hook of the memory'—that potentiality of junction which it carried with it—was the sacred river. And through their association with the sacred river the caves of ice were drawn into the dream:

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
Then reached the caverns measureless to man ...  
    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!

That is no fortuitous concourse of atoms. The elements of the dream are knit together through linkages like filaments of steel.<sup>63</sup>

And now it is possible to take another step. In Maurice's Preliminary Chapter occurs the following sentence:

I have immediately directed my own and my reader's attention to the intelligent Memoir, and very accurate map of Hindostan, presented to the world by *Major Rennell*, whose unwearied efforts to elucidate her intricate geography, must secure him the applause of all those who are either interested in the commerce, or attached to the literature, of the East.<sup>64</sup>

That is the sort of thing on reading which Coleridge was apt to find his heart moved more than with a trumpet, and the next entry in the Note Book is brief but pregnant:

Major Rennell.<sup>65</sup>

We know Coleridge's habit of verifying references, and the memorandum is conclusive evidence of his intentions in the present case. And since at the moment he was on a hot scent of promising materials for his galaxy of Hymns, there is special reason for assuming that his purpose was carried out. ['I seldom read except to amuse myself, and I am almost always reading. ... I compose very little, and I absolutely hate composition' (*Letters*, I, 181). When Coleridge meant to *read a book*, he usually read it. When he meant to *write a poem*, he generally did not.]

Now the work to which Maurice had referred, the *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan* (1793), contains an uncommonly inviting description of the landscape of Cashmere. And in it are certain significant details:

The valley or country of Cashmere, is celebrated throughout upper Asia for its *romantic* beauties, [and] for *the fertility of its soil*. ... It is ... surrounded by steep mountains, that tower above the regions of snow; and ... its soil is composed of the mud deposited by *a capital river*, which originally formed its waters into a lake ... until it *opened itself a passage through the mountains*. ... The author of the *Ayin Acbaree* dwells with rapture on the beauties of Cashmere. ... Only light showers fall there: these, however, are in abundance enough to feed some thousands of cascades, which are precipitated into the valley, from every part of *the stupendous and romantic bulwark that encircles it*. ... In a word, the whole scenery is beautifully picturesque; and a part of the *romantic* circle of mountains, makes up a portion of every landscape. The pardonable superstition of the sequestered inhabitants, has

multiplied the places of worship of Mahadeo [whose image it was that appeared in the cave], of Bishen, and of Brama. *All Cashmere is holy land; and miraculous fountains abound.* ... To sum up the account of Cashmere, in the words of [Abul Fazil], '*It is a garden in perpetual spring.*'<sup>66</sup>

Now let us reread a few lines of the poem:

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 ...

There are links in plenty to catch up Major Rennell's picture into that stream of images which were rising before the sleeping Coleridge as *things*—the miraculous fountains, and the fertile ground, and the river that opened a passage through the mountains, and the sunny garden spot. And the landscape of the deep romantic vale of Cashmere and the landscape of the valley of the upper Nile seem to have melted into one another in the dream, and the enchanted territory of the poem becomes '*holy land.*'

## IX

Purchas and Bartram and Bruce and Maurice we know beyond peradventure that Coleridge had read. Major Rennell we know that he meant to read, and probably did. Up to this point, whatever may be said of our conclusions, the facts on which they rest admit no question. Coleridge had read these things; and the images which we have just been calling back had sunk into those secret tracts where all that is forgotten waits, keyed to associations at the lightest touch of which the sleeping past may flash up again—like a Venetian thoroughfare—to recollection. For

Zwar ist's mit der [Traum]-Fabrik  
Wie mit einem Weber-Meisterstück,  
Wo Ein Tritt tausend Fäden regt,  
Die Schifflein herüber hinüber schiessen,  
Die Fäden ungesehen fließen,  
Ein Schlag tausend Verbindungen schlägt. (67)

But there are two or three other books which I cannot definitely prove that Coleridge had read, yet which, for the strongest reasons, we may be reasonably certain that he had. It is their probable contribution to the dream which I shall now present. And the first is directly connected with the *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*.

At the beginning of his notice of Cashmere, Major Rennell refers as follows to a famous narrative: 'The reader may collect from Bernier (*the most instructive of all Indian travellers*), in what mode the emperors travelled to Cashmere; as he has written a full account of his journey, when he travelled thither in the suite of Aurungzebe, in the year 1664.'<sup>68</sup> Just two pages beyond the account of the image of ice, moreover, Maurice in his turn, having already whetted his reader's interest in Bernier's journey to Cashmere,<sup>69</sup> devotes more than a page to an incident in his travels, 'so curious and interesting, that,' as he says, 'I cannot use the reader so ill as to pass it over.'<sup>70</sup> And *Mr. F. Bernier's Voyage to Surat*, which had given Dryden the materials for *Aurenge-Zebe*, was easily accessible.<sup>71</sup> The normal chances that Coleridge would look it up were heightened, moreover, by the peculiar circumstances of the moment. For (once more) it must not be forgotten that Coleridge was just then avowedly collecting data for his six Hymns; that the scope of the Hymns was appalling, with 'a sublime enumeration of all the charms and Tremendities of Nature' as a single item; that their hopeful projector was striking out, as the Note Book shows, from one book to another in directions which seemed to promise contributions; and that from both Maurice and Rennell the guideposts pointed straight and enticingly to Bernier.

Now Bernier, who is as entertaining as he is instructive, and whose account of his experiences en route to Cashmere is diverting to the last degree, gives in his Ninth Letter 'An exact description of the kingdom of Kachemire ... together with an answer to five considerable questions of a friend.'<sup>72</sup> It is worth pausing to note that the fifth of the friend's demands is this: 'That I would at length decide unto you the old controversy touching *the causes of the increase of the Nile*.'<sup>73</sup> And in his answer Bernier tells, on the authority of 'two ambassadors of Ethiopia' whom he met at Delhi, how the Nile 'issueth out of the earth at two big bubbling springs,' and how, as 'a pretty river ... it runs bending' thence.<sup>74</sup> If Coleridge did read Bernier, there was curiously enough a second hook to draw Cashmere and the fountains of the Nile together in the dream.

But he would also find a lively account of Cashmere itself, set down with a wealth of picturesque detail—an account which is extraordinarily rich in its links with that other reading which we know to have poured its imagery into the dream. It is out of the question to give all the parallels. Like Aloadine's Paradise and Kubla Khan's demesnes the vale is a spot of goodly gardens, houses of pleasure, pleasant springs, delightful streams:

Out of all these mountains do issue *innumerable sources and rivulets*. ... All these rivulets, descending from the mountains, make the plain and all those hillocks so fair and fruitful, that one would take this whole kingdom for *some evergreen garden*. ... The lake hath this peculiar, that 'tis full of little isles, which are as many *gardens of pleasure*, that appear all green in the midst of the water. ... Beyond the lake, upon the side of the hills, there is nothing but *houses and gardens of pleasure ... full of springs and rivulets*.<sup>75</sup>

Like Bartram's Florida, the vale abounds in ebullient fountains:

Thence I went to find out a fountain, which hath something that's rare enough in it; bubbling up gently, and rising with some little impetuosity, and making small bubbles of air, and carrying with it, to the top, some small sand that is very fine, which goeth away again as it came, the water becoming still, a moment after it, without ebullition, and without bringing up sand; and soon after beginning afresh as before, and so continuing its motion by intervals, which are not regular.<sup>76</sup>

That might have come straight out of Bartram. There is, moreover, a cave of ice ('a grotto of odd congelation'), which is clearly identical with the cave of the bubble of ice in Maurice; and there is a subterranean cavern; and 'the wall of the world' slopes down green hills to the plain; and not far away in the story are the fountains of the Nile.<sup>77</sup> There are other correspondences, but these must serve. If Coleridge had ever read the *Voyage to Surat*, its marvels could not but have linked themselves in the dream with the like 'charms and Tremendities of Nature' in Purchas and Bartram and Bruce and Maurice.

All this, however, might have found its way into the dream had Coleridge never laid eyes on Bernier. But there is one group of pictures in the *Voyage* which it is well nigh impossible to believe that he had not seen. The structure which Kubla Khan decreed in Xanadu was 'a stately pleasure-dome,' and it stood, in the dream, in close proximity to the fountain which flung up the river:

The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.

There is no hint of all that in Purchas or Bartram or Bruce or Maurice. But among Bernier's pleasant little vignette sketches are these:

Returning from Send-brary I turn'd a little aside from the road to go and lie at Achiavel,



From the day of the Fathers down to Coleridge's own century (and since) one of those still-vex'd questions which have stretched the *pia mater* of many a subtle brain has been the identity of two of the four rivers—Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel, and Phrath—which, on the authority of *Genesis*, went out of Eden. That the last two represent the Tigris and Euphrates has always been matter of common consent. As for the other pair, in the dispute which waxed and waned through centuries, Pison was now the Indus, now the Danube, now the Nile, but far more frequently the Ganges; whereas Gihon, in spite of scattering voices raised in favour of the Orontes, or the Araxes, or the Oxus, was almost universally believed to be the *Nile*. But between Mesopotamia (which, barring a few fantastic guesses, was the accepted site of Paradise) between Mesopotamia and the regions where admittedly the Nile, as mortal eyes behold it, takes its rise, lay the deserts of Arabia and the Red Sea. How, on the venerable and orthodox assumption, did the now doubly sacred river make its way?

There could, of course, be but one answer. It must flow under ground and under sea. And that myth of the subterranean-submarine passage of the Nile from Asia through to Africa Coleridge certainly knew. It is needless to conjecture how often, in 'the wide, wild wilderness' of his early reading, he had met it. He could scarcely have escaped it in Pausanias and the Life of Apollonius of Tyana,<sup>83</sup> but the book entitled 'Of the Primæval Earth, and Paradise' in that *Sacred Theory* of Thomas Burnet which he twice proposed to turn into blank verse, and later bracketed with Plato—not to mention that other work of Burnet's which gave the motto to 'The Ancient Mariner'—these two afford evidence enough. The ancients, says Burnet, 'supposed generally, that paradise was in the other hemisphere ... and yet they believed that Tygris, Euphrates, Nile, and Ganges, were the rivers of paradise, or came out of it; and these two opinions they could not reconcile ... but by supposing that these four rivers had their fountainheads in the other hemisphere, and by some wonderful trajection broke out again here.'<sup>84</sup> 'To this sense also,' he remarks again, 'Moses Bar Cepha often expresseth himself; as also Epiphanius, Procopius Gazéus, and Severianus in Catena. Which notion amongst the ancients, concerning the trajection or passage of the paradisiacal rivers under ground, or under sea, from one continent into another, is to me, I confess, unintelligible.'<sup>85</sup> It is Moses bar Cepha, however, who is most explicit, and Moses bar Cepha Coleridge probably knew, if not at firsthand, at least through the learned pages of another then celebrated work.

Bruce's paragraph about the ebullience of the second fountain of the Nile,<sup>86</sup> which so strikingly parallels Bartram, is quoted from his translation of pages 57 and 59 of the first volume of Athanasius Kircher's *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*. I must regretfully forego the opportunity thus afforded of dwelling on the astonishing Athanasius and his still more dumbfounding works.<sup>87</sup> It is enough to say that the *Œdipus Ægyptiacus* is prefaced by dedicatory verses to its patron in Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, English, German, Hungarian, Bohemian, Illyrian, Old Slavonic, Serbian, Turkish, Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, Chaldean, Armenian, Persian, Samaritan, Coptic, Ethiopic, the Brahman alphabet, Chinese, and Egyptian Hieroglyphics. It is a book after Coleridge's own heart; his old friend Dupuis has copious references to it; Bruce's long extract would be enough to send him to it, if he had not already gone. And I have no doubt (though this I cannot prove) that he read the fascinating farrago on the subject of the Nile which fills the half-dozen pages just before the account which Bruce excerpts. And Moses bar Cepha heads the list of Kircher's, as of Burnet's, authorities.

And what Moses bar Cepha states is picturesque enough:

The name of the second river is Gihon (*which is also called the Nile*): it flows through all the land of Chus. For no sooner has it come out of Paradise than it vanishes beneath the depths of the sea and the streams of Ocean, whence, through secret passages of the earth, it emerges again in the mountains of Ethiopia. ... But [says bar Cepha] someone will ask, how is it possible that these rivers, when once they have passed out of Paradise, should be precipitated beneath the streams of Ocean and the heart of the sea, and should then at length emerge in this our land?



The obvious answer follows: With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Whereupon Moses bar Cepha takes up his parable again:

This also we assert, that Paradise lies in a much higher region than this land, and so it happens that the rivers, impelled by so mighty a force, descend thence through *huge chasms* and subterranean channels, and, thus confined, are hurried away beneath the bottom of the sea, and *boil up* in this our orb. [The Latin text is appended in the Notes.<sup>88</sup>]

This is immediately followed in Kircher by an extract from the *Geographia Arabica Medicca*, in which the plain of the Nile is said to be full of *cedars* (plena Cedris), and the whole land cavernous within—a region of mighty abysses (est enim tota hæc terra intus cava, et abyssos habens ingentes).<sup>89</sup> The Arabic geography now disposed of, Kircher cites as a further witness Odoardus Lopez Lusitanus, who declares that the inhabitants of these quarters affirm with one accord that the Nile, plunging headlong through certain horrible and impenetrable valleys, through *chasms inaccessible to man* (per præcipitia hominibus inaccessa) and pathless deserts, is swallowed up in valleys so exceedingly deep that it is, as it were, received within the very bowels of the earth, and absorbed by its abysses. After which it reappears, and, passing the cataracts, flows with many meanders (multiplici gyro) into the sea.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, to add the crowning touch, between the accounts of Moses bar Cepha and the Arabic geographer, Kircher inserts a ‘True and Genuine Topography of the Fountains of the Nile [*Vera et genuina fontium Nili topographia*], made by P. Peter Pais on the 21st of April in the year 1618 in the presence of the Emperor,’ in which the two fountains are depicted on the summit of a craggy hill, encompassed with a prim circle of (one hopefully conjectures) incense-bearing trees, whence the Nile, meandering with a conspicuously mazy motion, forms the boundary of a plainly labelled kingdom of Amara (Amhara Regnum). And on the maps of Odoardus and the Arabic geographer engraved on the same plate, the river's mazianness rivals that of the Dædalian labyrinth.<sup>91</sup> The traditional association of the Nile with mighty caverns (to say nothing of meanderings and chasms) was still plentifully current in Coleridge's day.

And once more the link with Bartram is singularly close. For again and again Bartram might almost be paraphrasing Kircher's Latin. One passage, just before the account of the Manate Spring, will serve to bring out the curious correspondence:

These waters ... augment and form ... subterraneous rivers, which wander in darkness beneath the surface of the earth, by innumerable doublings, windings and secret labyrinths; no doubt in some places forming vast reservoirs and subterranean lakes ... and possibly ... meeting irresistible obstructions in their course, they suddenly break through these perforated fluted rocks, in high, perpendicular jets. ... Thus by means of those subterranean courses ... they emerge ... in those surprising vast fountains.<sup>92</sup>

Bartram's subterranean caverns and the mythical abysses of the Nile are two of a kind. It would be next to impossible for Coleridge to read of either without some reminiscence of the other. And the two were probably associated in his memory long before the moment of the dream.

As for caverns ‘*measureless to man*,’ Paez states that he twice tried the depth of the second fountain and could find no bottom—‘fundum nullum invenimus ... denuo rem tentavimus, sed nec sic fundum tenere potuimus’;<sup>93</sup> and Kircher, in his remarks upon Paez's account, refers to the depth of the fountain as ‘inexplorabilis.’<sup>94</sup> Lobo asserts<sup>95</sup> that ‘we could find no Bottom, and were assured by the Inhabitants, that none ever had been found.’ Whatever Coleridge knew or did not know about these accounts, he knew and had long known his Herodotus.<sup>96</sup> And Herodotus has a most interesting tale. He found, he says, no one who professed any knowledge of the source of the Nile, except a single person, a scribe in the city of Saïs. And the scribe's story was this:<sup>97</sup>

Between Syêné ... and Elephantiné, there are two hills with sharp conical tops; the name of the one is Crophî, of the other, Mophî. Midway between them are the fountains of the Nile, *fountains which it is impossible to fathom*. ... The fountains were known to be unfathomable, he declared, because Psammetichus ... had made trial of them. He had caused a rope to be made, many thousand fathoms in length, and had sounded the fountain with it, *but could find no bottom*. [Herodotus learned also that 'the river wind[s] greatly, like the Mæander.']

'Caverns measureless to man' had been for twenty-three centuries associated with the legend of the Nile. It is little wonder, given what we now know about 'the sacred river,' that they turned up in the dream.

The image of the sacred river, then, which rose up before Coleridge as a *thing*, was a dream-picture, foreshortened and reversed as if it lay in an enchanted crystal, of the tremendous Odyssey of the legendary Nile. Visualized under the spell of Bartram's springing fountains, the river in the vision bursts from immeasurable depths, traverses maziily, its cosmic sweep diminished to a *coup d'œil*, five miles of wood and dale—then sinks in tumult to immeasurable depths again. 'From the great deep to the great deep it goes'—to the 'lifeless ocean' and the 'sunless sea' beneath the upper lands and waters of the world.

And I suspect that with the imagery of these nether seas of ancient story there was merged a conception vaster still, which had long been hovering in Coleridge's restless head. Between the two memoranda in the Note Book in which he dallied with the project of turning the *Telluris Theoria Sacra* into verse, stand, as we have seen,<sup>98</sup> certain entries which show beyond question that he had read, with kindled imagination, the whole of Burnet's 'grand Miltonic romance.' Now Burnet's daring cosmogony is built about the central waters and the central fires. Beneath the hollow shell of the earth lay, from the beginning, the waters of the great abyss. At the deluge the fountains of the deep were broken up, and the shattered frame of the earth sank beneath the rush of the ascending floods. Subterranean rivers still pursue their way 'through the dark pipes of the earth,' and beneath us still are gathered up, in subterranean lakes and seas, the cataracts of the abyss. And at the end, when the earth shall melt with fervent heat, the water that are under the earth, pent up and turned to steam, will lend their shattering aid again, to bring about the last catastrophe. Had Coleridge ever carried out his chimerical scheme of versifying Burnet's gorgeous prose, a Hymn to Water of epic grandeur would have made his own superfluous. But while the project was stirring in his brain, the Deluge and the Conflagration were storing the cells of memory with images. And Burnet's titanic conception of a dark, illimitable ocean, lurking beneath the unmeasured gulfs and chasms of the world, was present (I think we may safely assume) somewhere in the background of the dream.

## XI

There was another storied river which sank beneath the earth, and flowed under the sea, and rose again in a famous fountain. As was inevitable, it was constantly associated with the legendary Nile. And Coleridge, like every schoolboy, knew it:

... Alpheum fama est huc Elidis amnem  
occultas egisse vias subter mare; qui nunc  
ore, Arethusa, tuo Siculis confunditur undis. (99)

But his sources of information were by no means limited to Virgil.

Burnet has a delightful note about Alpheus,<sup>100</sup> but for us the ancients are more to the point. No one who has followed Coleridge's reading will doubt, I think, his acquaintance with Pausanias. Were there no other reason, Thomas Taylor had translated *The Description of Greece* in 1794, professing to 'have unfolded,' in his highly neo-Platonic notes, 'a theory which seems for many ages to have been entirely unknown.'<sup>101</sup> And 'Taylor the English pagan' was among Coleridge's 'darling studies.'<sup>102</sup> Here, then, are two excerpts from Taylor's

translation of Pausanias:

But the Alpheus appears to possess something different from other rivers; for it often hides itself in the earth, and again rises out of it. Thus it ... merges itself in the Tegeatic land. Ascending from hence in Asæa, and mingling itself with the water of Eurotas, it falls a second time into the earth, emerges from hence, in that place which the Arcadians call the fountains, and running through the Pisæan and Olympian plains, pours itself into the sea. ... Nor can the agitation of the Adriatic sea restrain its course; for running through this mighty and violent sea, it mingles itself with the water of Arethusa in Ortygia ... retaining its ancient name Alpheus.<sup>103</sup>

From the water of Alpheus, therefore, mingling itself with that of Arethusa, I am persuaded the fable respecting the love of *Alpheus* originated. Such indeed of the Greeks or Ægyptians as have travelled to Æthiopia ... relate that *the Nile* entering into a certain marsh, and gliding through this no otherwise than if it was a continent, flows afterward through lower Æthiopia into Egypt, till it arrives at Pharos and the sea which it contains.<sup>104</sup>

The Nile and the Alpheus, then, are immediately associated in Pausanias.

How early Coleridge knew Strabo I do not know. There is every reason to believe that the youngster who translated Synesius at the age of fifteen, and who expounded Plotinus and recited Homer and Pindar in their Greek at Christ's Hospital, had read the *Geography* during his school days. He certainly was much at home in it later, for he quotes from the Greek text in a notebook of 1806-07, and again in *Omniana*, in both of which he recognizes Strabo's hand in a noble sentence of Ben Jonson's dedication to *The Fox*.<sup>105</sup> At all events, here are a few remarks of Strabo, who discusses the Alpheus at great length:

People tell the mythical story that the river Arethusa is the Alpheius, which latter, they say, rises in the Peloponnesus, flows underground through the sea as far as Arethusa, and then empties thence once more into the sea.<sup>106</sup> ... Marvellous tales of this sort are stretched still further by those who make the Inopus cross over from *the Nile* to Delos. And Zoilus the rhetorician says ... that *the Alpheius* rises in Tenedos.<sup>107</sup>

Again, in a context of ebullient fountains and subterranean rivers disappearing in a chasm, Strabo continues:

The territory of the Palici has craters that spout up water in a dome-like jet and receive it back again into the same recess. The cavern near Mataurus contains an immense gallery through which a river flows invisible for a considerable distance, and then emerges to the surface, as is the case with the Orontes in Syria, which sinks into the chasm [... and rises again forty stadia away.

Similar, too, are the cases both of the Tigris in Mesopotamia and of *the Nile* in Libya ... and again, the water near the Arcadian Asea is first forced below the surface and then, much later, emerges as both the Eurotas and *the Alpheius*.<sup>108</sup>

Once more, the Nile and the Alpheus are linked together as kindred streams.

That Coleridge, with his tastes, and classical training, and cormorant habits, had read Seneca's *Quæstiones Naturales* before 1798, is a reasonable assumption. It must not be forgotten that he wrote Thelwall in 1796: 'I have read almost everything'<sup>109</sup>—a statement which few who know their Coleridge will seriously doubt! His later knowledge of Seneca has ample attestation.<sup>110</sup> And Seneca, whose *Quæstiones Naturales* are a veritable mine of lore about the elements, has in that remarkable treatise matter of no small interest touching the

Alpheus. In the twenty-sixth chapter of Book Three—a chapter which begins with mention of the Nile—Seneca quotes a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* about Lycus, swallowed up by the yawning earth, and then proceeds:

In the East as well as the West this happens. The Tigris is absorbed by the earth and after long absence reappears at a point far removed, but undoubtedly the same river. ... Thence [from the behavior of the fountain Arethusa] comes the belief that the Alpheus makes its way right from Achaia to Sicily, stealing under sea by secret sluice, and reappearing only when it reaches the coast of Syracuse.<sup>111</sup>

But the most significant passage is in the Sixth Book:

I do not, indeed, suppose that you will long hesitate to believe that there are underground rivers and a *hidden sea*. From what other cause could the rivers burst out and come to the surface? ... And what are you to say when you see *the Alpheus* ... sink in Achaia and, having crossed beneath the sea, pour forth in Sicily the pleasant fountain Arethuse? And don't you know that among the explanations given of the occurrence of the inundation of *the Nile* in summer, one is that it bursts forth from the ground?<sup>112</sup>

Whereupon follows the story which Seneca heard himself from the lips of two noncommissioned officers sent by Nero to investigate the sources of the Nile.

But that is not all. For the preceding chapter contains a vivid picture of the 'lifeless ocean' and the 'sunless sea' out of which such rivers as the Nile and the Alpheus rise, and to which they return:

Now surely a man trusts too much to the sight of the eyes and cannot launch out his imagination beyond, if he does not believe that *the depths of earth contain a vast sea* with winding shores. I see nothing to prevent or oppose the existence of a beach down there *in the obscurity*, or a sea finding its way through the hidden entrances to its appointed place. There, too, ... the hidden regions being desert *without inhabitant* give freer scope to the waves of the nether ocean.<sup>113</sup>

Moreover, that Bernardinus Ramazzinus from whom Burnet quotes *in extenso* the Abyssinian account of the deluge, links the Nile and the Alpheus on the same page.<sup>114</sup> And finally, in the *Argonauticon* of Valerius Flaccus, the two rivers share a single line:

Ceu refluens Padus aut septem proiectus in amnes  
Nilus et Hesperium veniens Alpheos in orbem. (115)

The traditional links between the Nile and the Alpheus are like hoops of steel.

Now some, if not all, of these passages Coleridge without doubt had read. And just as ocular spectra which 'flashed' from Bartram's fountains and from the fountains of the Nile had telescoped in the dream, so there seem to have merged linked reminiscences of the Alpheus and the Nile. And by one of those puckish freaks of the dream intelligence which are often so preternaturally apt, 'Alpheus' has been docked of its syllabic excess, and dream-fashioned, as 'Alph,' into a quasi-equivalence with 'Nile.' The *artifex verborum* of the dream—witness 'Xanadu' and 'Abora'—was no less adept than the waking Coleridge in the metamorphosis of words. [There is abundant evidence of the invention of new words in dreams—see, for example, Havelock Ellis's *selvdrolla* and *jaleisa* (*The World of Dreams*, pp. 43-44, 49). Kraepelin's monograph 'Ueber Sprachstörungen im Traume' (*Psychologische Arbeiten*, Bd. v, 1906, pp. 1-104), to which Havelock Ellis refers, will satisfy anybody who runs over its classified lists of dream-fabricated vocables that 'Xanadu,' and

‘Abora,’ and ‘Alph’ are perfectly normal formations, when judged by the semasiology of dreams.] And none of us who has ever dreamed can doubt how exquisitely right and meet and natural ‘Alph’ must in the dream have seemed—a name which sprang like a fountain from the inmost nature of the thing, rising up, like the dream-music, a ‘mingled measure’ from the Alpheus and the Nile.

## XII

The last sentence Coleridge had read before his eyes rested on the words ‘In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace,’ was a remarkable expression of the belief among the Tartars of the survival of the dead.<sup>116</sup> And he had turned the page but once since he had read another statement of that belief more striking still:

When he is dead, if he be a chiefe man, hee is buried in the field where pleaseth him. And hee is buried with his Tent, sitting in the midst thereof, with a Table set before him, and a platter full of meate, and a Cup of Mares-milke. There is also buried with him a Mare and Colt, a Horse with bridle and saddle: and they eate another Horse ... stuffing his hide with straw, setting it aloft on two or foure poles, that hee may have in the other world a Tabernacle and other things fitting for his use.<sup>117</sup>

And between the two passages, within less than a page of the words that slipped bodily into the dream, stands this:

Their Priests were diviners: they were many, but had one Captaine or chiefe Bishop, who alwayes placed his house or Tent before that of the Great Can, about a stoncs cast distant ... When an Eclipse happens they sound their Organs and Timbrels, and make a great noyse. ... They foretell holy dayes, and those which are unluckie for enterprises. *No warres are begunne or made without their word.*<sup>118</sup>

Of this at least, then, we are sure: when Coleridge fell asleep, the last impressions which he received included images of dead warriors surviving in the other world, in their habit as they lived; of things foretold, heard through ‘a great noyse’; and of wars undertaken only at the diviners’ word. And among the images which rose up before him in the dream was this:

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

Between the sinking into Coleridge's mind of that confluence of suggestions and the rising of the magnificently phrased conception of the dream lay, it would seem, a period measured by minutes. And meantime hosts of other images had been thronging up.

For I suspect that we are once more in the presence of a cluster-point of the ‘hooked atoms.’ Recollections of Bruce, as we know, were actively astir. Now by far the most vivid personality in Bruce's narrative, except Bruce himself, is Ozoro Esther, the young wife of the old vizier of that king of Abyssinia whose floating hair, on the expedition against the rebels, got him into Absalom's predicament. And in his account of this expedition, Bruce gives a dramatic rehearsal of a talk he had with Ozoro Esther:

‘But, pray’ [says Bruce], ‘what is the meaning of the Ras's speech to me about both armies wishing to fight at Serbraxos? Where is this Serbraxos?’—‘Why, says she, here, on a hill just by; *the Begemder people have a prophecy, that one of their governors is to fight a king at Serbraxos*, to defeat him, and slay him there: in his place is to succeed another king, whose name is Theodorus, and in whose reign all Abyssinia is to be free from war ... and the empire of Abyssinia to be extended as far as Jerusalem.’—‘All this destruction and conquest without

war! That will be curious indeed. I think I could wish to see this Theodorus,' said I, laughing—'See him you will, replied Ozoro Esther; peace, happiness, and plenty will last all his reign, and a thousand years afterwards. Enoch and Elias will rise again, and will fight and destroy Gog and Magog, and all this without any war.' 'On which I again said ... And now, why does Ras Michael choose to fight at Serbraxos?' ... 'Why, says she, *all the hermits and holy men on our side, that can prophesy, have assured him he is to beat the rebels this month at Serbraxos*; and a very holy man, a hermit from Waldubba, came to him at Gondar, and obliged him to march out against his will, *by telling him this prophecy, which he knows to be true*, as the man is not like common prophets. ... Such a man as this, you know, Yagoube, cannot lie.'<sup>119</sup>

Like the incident of the floating hair, that is told in a fashion which stamps it on the memory, and which may quite possibly have brought about another fusion of Tartary and Abyssinia in the dream. Both passages, at all events, had certainly slipped, with their fleeting impressions, below the threshold of Coleridge's consciousness, and of such buried treasure is the stuff of dreams.

I wish I could say, with the complete assurance which is based on evidence, that Coleridge had read *Vathek*. As it is, I have neither doubt nor proof. Henley's translation, which preceded the French original by a year, had been twelve years in circulation—since Coleridge, that is, was a school-boy of fourteen. If he did read it, he could no more than the rest of us forget it. And its earlier pages are conceived in the very spirit of the dream. There were the Palaces of the Five Senses—'pleasure-houses' *par excellence*; there was a Paradise, with cedars and incense-bearing trees; there were four fountains, like the 'four sacred rivers' which watered Eden; and at the foot of the hill of the Four Fountains there was 'an immense gulph' or 'chasm.'<sup>120</sup> And as *Vathek*, after the Giaour had disappeared in the abyss, looked over the edge,

One while, he fancied to himself *voices arising from the depth of the gulph*: at another, he seemed to distinguish the accents of the Indian; but, all was no more than *the hollow murmur of waters, and the din of the cataracts that rushed from steep to steep*, down the sides of the mountain.<sup>121</sup>

The tumult, as in the dream, is the tumult of the waters, and it rises with the voices, as in the dream, from the abyss. That a reminiscence of it flashed through the interweaving fancies of the vision is well within the bounds of possibility.

### XIII

One other detail, this time a phrase, slipped into the dream from the limbo of sleeping *words*, at the touch of a determinate association. Coleridge had planned an edition of Collins and Gray, which twice appears among his projects in the Note Book.<sup>122</sup> There need be, then, no question of his familiarity with Collins's exquisite though slender sheaf of verse, even had we not his outburst of ardent admiration in a letter to Thelwall of December, 1796:

Collins's 'Ode on the Poetical Character,'—that part of it, I should say, beginning with 'The band (as faery legends say) Was wove on that creating day,'—has inspired and whirled *me* along with greater agitations of enthusiasm than any the most *impassioned* scene in Schiller or Shakespeare.<sup>123</sup>

Now in 'The Passions' occur these charming lines on Melancholy, who,

In notes by distance made more sweet,  
Pour'd thro' the mellow horn her pensive soul:

And, dashing soft from rocks around  
 Bubbling runnels join'd the sound;  
 Thro' glades and glooms the mingled measure stole,  
 Or o'er some haunted stream, with fond delay  
 Round an holy calm diffusing,  
 Love of peace and lonely musing,  
 In hollow murmurs died away. (124)

And in the dream, just after the tumult of the river's fall,

... was heard the mingled measure  
 From the fountain and the caves.

The ceaseless tumult of the sacred river recalled the mellower tumult of the bubbling runnels dashing soft from rocks around, as Coleridge's 'Through wood and dale,' but eight lines earlier, had echoed Collins's 'Thro' glades and glooms.' And 'haunted' and 'holy,' still in successive lines, had already stolen into the measures of the dream:

A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted ... (125)

'Kubla Khan' is the fabric of a vision, but every image that rose up in its weaving had passed that way before. And it would seem that there is nothing haphazard or fortuitous in their return.

#### XIV

There are other elements of the dream which refuse to divulge their secrets, and which 'sweetly torment us' (as Emerson, quoted by William James, felicitously puts it) 'with invitations to their inaccessible homes.'<sup>126</sup> How could it possibly be otherwise? About some of these teasing phantoms of association I confess, of course, to cherishing more or less colorable conjectures.<sup>127</sup> But if this ... possess any worth, that value lies, not in its conjectures, but in its evidence—the evidence which it offers of the amazing power of association in the dream. Beyond that evidence, which can at least be weighed and tested, I do not for the present care to go. [I wish to state with emphasis that I am dealing in this study with what psychoanalysts call the material content of the dream, and with that alone. With its so-called latent content—its possible symbolism of wish-fulfilment or conflict or what not—I have nothing whatever to do. Even granting one or another of the conflicting assumptions of modern dream psychology, I do not believe that after the lapse of one hundred and twenty-seven years the intimate, deep-lying, personal facts on which alone such an analysis must rest are longer discoverable, and I doubt whether any trained psychoanalyst would venture an interpretation. 'I believe,' wrote one of the most brilliant and withal most sane of recent investigators in this field, the late Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, 'I believe that a really satisfactory analysis of a dream is only possible to the dreamer himself or to one who knows the conflicts and experiences of the dreamer in a most unusual way' (*Conflict and Dream*, p. 149). An essay at such an analysis of 'Kubla Khan,' regarded as a dream, has just been made, however, by Mr. Robert Graves, and, since it is illuminating in its method, I have examined it briefly in the Notes.<sup>128</sup> Incidentally, it may be worth while to suggest, without prejudice, that the facts which this investigation has disclosed, with reference to both 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan,' counsel caution in the prevalent pursuit of so-called Freudian complexes in everything.]

But I do wish, before leaving this huge phantasmagoria, to direct attention to an implication of material importance. I have emphasized, throughout the discussion of 'The Ancient Mariner,' the profoundly significant part played in imaginative creation by the associations of ideas—whether those associations wrought their synthesis before the impressions so combined sank into the subliminal reservoir, or during their submergence there, or at the instant of their flashing back to consciousness. And I have offered no little evidence of their activity. But in 'The Ancient Mariner' a determining will was constructively at work,

consciously manipulating and adjusting and refashioning the associated images of memory into conformity with a design. And through that conscious imaginative moulding the links of association, as was inevitable, were often obliterated, or at least obscured. Yet sufficient traces of them still remain, as our scrutiny of Coleridge's reading soon disclosed, to establish their enormous influence. Do the facts before us contribute any further light?

I think they do. For in 'Kubla Khan' the complicating factor—the will as a consciously constructive agency—was in abeyance. 'All the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort.' The dream, it is evident, was the unchecked subliminal flow of blending images, and the dreamer merely the detached and unsolicitous spectator. And so the sole factor that determined the form and sequence which the dissolving phantasmagoria assumed, was the subtle potency of the associative links. There was this time no intervention of a waking intelligence intent upon a plan, to obliterate or blur them. And it is largely that absence of deliberate manipulation which has made it possible to disengage, to a degree unattainable in our study of 'The Ancient Mariner,' the bewildering hooks and eyes of the memory which were the irresponsible artificers of the dream.

But the facts thus established carry with them, as I have said, an important consequence. For we have only to recall those passages in 'The Ancient Mariner' in which the formative associations have been traceable, to recognize that their operations are essentially the same. The mass of evidence now before us corroborates with singular cogency our earlier conclusions. The subliminal blendings and fusings from which springs the insubstantial architecture of the dream are also latent beneath the complex workings of design. And that is no less essential to our understanding of the creative process than the further fact that in the one case the 'streamy' associations are unruddered, whereas in the other they are masterfully curbed.

The linked images, then, which are now before us are, with little question, constituent elements of the dream. But the dream itself is another matter. And it is high time that we pass from the crowded vestibule of consciousness to the winged wonder which emerged into the light.

### Notes

1. The dream occurred in September, 1803, and Coleridge communicated the lines to Southey a few days later (B. E., I, 284-85):

Here sleeps at length poor Col. and without screaming  
Who died, as he had always lived, a dreaming:  
Shot dead, while sleeping, by the gout within,  
Alone, and all unknown, at E'nbro' in an Inn.

'It was Tuesday night last,' he goes on—the letter is dated September 16, 1803—'at the Black Bull, Edinburgh.' He had already, in two letters written to Southey September 10 and 13, dwelt on the terrors of his sleep at this period, and the letter of September 10 contains the first draft of 'The Pains of Sleep' (*Letters*, I, 435-37, 440-41).

The 'Embro' lines occur in another letter, undated, but probably written about 1828 or 1829 (see Campbell, *Narrative*, p. 264, n. 2). It was printed, with a few squeamish omissions, in the *Athenæum*, January 17, 1835, p. 56. The original letter is now in the Norton Perkins collection in the Harvard College Library, and is accompanied by the cover, addressed to 'Frederic Renyolds [*sic*], Esq<sup>r</sup>. at Mr. MacPherson's Nursery Ground, Archway Road,' thus verifying Campbell's conjecture that the letter was an acceptance of Frederic Mansell Reynolds's invitation to what turned out to be a gloriously bacchanalian occasion. No conception of Coleridge is complete which does not include William Jerdan's graphic picture of him on that memorable night, when he and Theodore Hook vied with each



other in excellent fooling (*The Autobiography of William Jerdan*, London, 1853, IV, 230-36)—a picture vividly supplemented by Lockhart, who was a fellow guest, in the *Quarterly Review*, LXXII (1843), 65-66 (the article is reprinted as *Theodore Hook: A Sketch*, London, Third edition, 1852; see pp. 23-24).

The lines, as Coleridge at this time recalled them, are these:

Here lies poor Col at length and without screaming  
Who died, as he had always liv'd, a dreaming—  
Shot with a pistol by the Gout within,  
Alone and all unknown, at Embro', in an Inn.

Havelock Ellis (*The World of Dreams*, Boston and New York, 1911, pp. 275-76) gives valuable references on the general subject of composition in dreams. See especially the dream poem reported in Sante de Sanctis, *I Sogni* (Turin, 1899), p. 369.

2. *Poems*, I, 295-96. Italics Coleridge's.
3. *Ibid.*, I, 295, n. 2; *Letters*, I, 245, n. 1; Campbell, *Poems*, p. xlii, note.
4. See above, p. 415, n. For other incorrect dates which Coleridge gives (especially for his own works), see A. P., p. 16 (cf., for example, B. E., I, 251, II, 240; *Letters*, I, 95, II, 703, etc.); B. L., I, 203 (so also *Letters from the Lake Poets*, p. 245); Campbell, *Poems*, pp. xi, n.; 562 (No. 12); 564, n. 1; 567 (No. 43); 627 (second column, foot); 633 (No. 178); 638 (No. 197); 641 (No. 207).
5. Purchas (1617), p. 472.
6. See the extract from the *Jamí'-ut-Tawáríkh* (*Djami el-Tévarikh*), or *General History of the World*, of Rashíduddín (Rashíd ed-Din, born about 1247 A.D.), in Yule, *Cathay and the Road Thither*, ed. Cordier (Hakluyt Society, 1914), III, 107-33, esp. 117-18, and II, 227, n. 1. For D'Ohsson's reading of the statement about the dream, see Yule-Cordier, III, 117, n. 4. Rashíd describes the building of Kubla's palace over 'a certain lake encompassed with meadows near the city.' The lake having been filled up and covered over and the palace built above it, 'the water that was thus imprisoned in the bowels of the earth in the course of time forced outlets in sundry places, and thus fountains were produced.' That is a singular parallel with the subterranean waters of the poem, yet Coleridge could not have known the *Jamí'-ut-Tawáríkh*. Rashíd's account of the palace is also quoted in *The Geographical Review* (Am. Geographical Soc.), XV (1925), 591, and in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, new series, VII, 329-38. The text of Rashíd's works is being edited by E. Blochet for the 'E. J. W. Gibb Memorial.' See volumes XII and XVIII, 2 of the Memorial series.

The site of Xanadu has recently been explored; see the article by Lawrence Impey on 'Shangtu, the Summer Capital of Kublai Khan,' with interesting plates and plans, in *The Geographical Review*, XV, 584-604—a reference for which I am indebted to Dr. H. J. Spinden of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. The site was visited in the autumn of 1872 by Dr. S. W. Bushell, Physician to H. B. M. Legation, Peking, whose reports of his expedition may be found in the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, XVIII (1873-74), 156-58; *Journal of the Royal Geog. Soc.*, XLIV (1874), 73-97, esp. 81-84; *Journal Royal Asiatic Soc.*, new series, VII, 329-38. See also Henri Cordier, *Les Voyages en Asie au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle du ... Odoric de Pordonone* (in *Recueil de Voyages et de Documents pour servir à l'histoire de la géographie depuis le XIII<sup>e</sup> jusqu'à la fin du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*), X, 413-15. For Friar Odoric's account, see *ibid.*, X, 371-72, and esp. Yule-Cordier, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, II, 227-28.

The coincidence of the dream-built palace becomes still more curious when we read, in a Diary of J. Payne Collier: 'we talked of dreams, the subject having been introduced by a recitation by Coleridge of some lines he had written many years ago upon *the building of a Dream-palace by Kubla-Khan*' (*Lectures and Notes*, p. 17; italics mine). But obviously Collier's note represents merely a confused

recollection.

7. 'Frost at Midnight,' l. 12 (*Poems*, I, 240); A. P., 110; Carlyon, I, 196, n.; *Aids to Reflection* (1825), pp. 230, 259. For other examples of 'goings-on' see *Prelude* (Selincourt), p. 520. See also *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, III, 418 (compare B. L., II, 111).
8. Order of a sort there obviously must be, in a succession of which the elements are linked. As that acute old diagnostician Thomas Hobbes tersely puts it in the *Leviathan*: 'Not every Thought to every Thought succeeds indifferently.' And since Hobbes, as Aubrey says, was 'rare at definitions' (and also master of an inimitable style), I shall quote a part of the highly pertinent remarks which follow: 'All Fancies are Motions within us, reliques of those made in the Sense: And those motions that immediately succeeded one another in the sense, continue also together after Sense. ... But because in sense, to one and the same thing perceived, sometimes one thing, sometimes another succeedeth, it comes to passe in time, that in the Imagining of anything, there is no certainty what we shall Imagine next; *Onely this is certain, it shall be something that succeeded the same before, at one time or another*' (*Leviathan*, Part I, chap. iii). There, set down with perfect precision, is at once the freedom and the determination of the dream.
9. *Transactions of the Wordsworth Society*, VI, 225, No. 285.
10. There are accounts of the Old Man of the Mountain in the *Pilgrimage* (1617), pp. 249, and esp. 428; in Hakluyt, IV, 438-39; and in Darwin, *Zoönomia*, II, 386. See also *The Voiage and Travayle of Sir John Maundeville*, cap. xc (ed. Ashton, pp. 194-96); Marco Polo, ed. Yule-Cordier (1903), I, 139-46.
11. Purchas, XI, 207-08.
12. Purchas, XI, 208-09.
13. Coleridge's use of the passage in the *Pilgrimes* was pointed out by a correspondent, Mr. Herbert Parsons, in the columns of the *London Times Literary Supplement* for March 9, 1922, p. 156—a reference which I owe to my friend and former pupil, Mr. John Bakeless. Lest I be thought remiss in acknowledging indebtedness to Mr. Parsons, it is proper to state that two years earlier, in a lecture delivered at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, April 15, 1920, I had discussed the relation of the Old Man of the Mountain to 'Kubla Khan,' and that I had previously called attention to it in the classroom. Mr. Parsons's view that Coleridge, in his prefatory note to 'Kubla Khan,' completely confused the *Pilgrimage* and the *Pilgrimes*, and that he really meant the second when he named the first, is untenable. The same thing, I fear, must be said of Mr. Parsons's interesting interpretation of the poem.
14. *Letters*, I, 240.
15. Fol 32<sup>a</sup>; *Archiv*, p. 359.
16. Bartram, p. 155.
17. On the next page (158) of the *Travels*, Bartram finds himself 'alone in the wilderness of Florida.'
18. B. E., I, 249.
19. *Poems*, I, 181, n. 1. It is the passage about the 'creeking' of the wings of the savanna crane.
20. Bartram, pp. 165-66.
21. There are one or two other fountains in Bartram, one of which (pp. 203-07) Coleridge remembered when he wrote the first draft of 'The Wanderings of Cain.' See also pp. 174-75, 225-26.

This is as good a place as any to refer to a bit of sublimated Bartram in Lafcadio Hearn's account of a Florida fountain, in the sketch which he called 'To the Fountain of Youth' (*Leaves from the Diary of an Impressionist*, Boston and N.Y., 1911, pp. 56-58).

22. Bersch, however, in his Marburg dissertation of 1909 (pp. 38-39) did not miss it. He quotes from the German translation of Bartram the account of 'der bezaubernde und erstaunliche Krystalquell,' and adds extracts from Bartram's descriptions of the 'Manate Spring' and the 'Alligator Hole.' Like E. H. Coleridge (see next note), whose paper there is no reason for supposing that he knew, he merely assembles the parallels.
23. *Poems*, I, 297, n. 4; *Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, Second Series, Volume XXVII (1906), p. 81. E. H. Coleridge here (though not in his note in the *Poems*) confuses the 'Alligator Hole'

(Bartram, p. 238) which Bartram (pp. 239-40) is describing, with the 'Great Sink,' of which the account appears more than thirty pages earlier (Bartram, pp. 203-07). On the previous page Mr. Coleridge does quote a sentence from the description of the 'Great Sink' (Bartram, p. 203), and then a sentence from the account of the 'Manate Spring' from Bartram, p. 231. The passage which he quotes (inaccurately) about the 'Great Sink' is from Bartram's account of the 'Alligator Hole' on p. 239. He does not refer to the 'enchanted ... fountain' of pp. 165-66. As it happens, I came upon all the evidence independently of either E. H. Coleridge or Bersch, being more interested at the time in following the fascinating trail to the end than in stopping to find out whether or not somebody else had been over it before me. What I have added, I think, is the demonstration of the associative links which explain the confluence of the scattered impressions with each other, and with the remaining elements of the dream. That neither of my predecessors had attempted, nor had either of them observed the significance of the green and fountainous wilderness plot. ...

24. Bartram, p. 221. See Note 19, above.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

27. For Brandl's suggestion that the waterfall of 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison' played its part in the dream, see his *Coleridge*, 1886, pp. 193-94. Bersch (p. 37) seems to have misunderstood Brandl's reference, and confused Porlock with Stowey.

28. It is normal, too, in that it reflects the idiosyncracies of the dreamer's waking mind. For the confluences of disparate elements in 'Kubla Khan' are essentially of one kind with those in 'The Ancient Mariner.' In both these poems, however, the scattered and often incongruous details have completely coalesced. In the rough draft of 'The Wanderings of Cain' (*Poems*, I, 285-86, n. 1; ... which is broadly synchronous with 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' (pp. 237, 538, ...), they are, on the other hand, still unblended and unfused, and, at just this stage of our inquiry, that strange fragment constitutes in consequence a curiously illuminating document. For, as it happens, many of our old familiar friends are there.

Bartram is present, beyond possibility of doubt, in both the rough draft and the more fully executed fragment (*Poems*, I, 288-92). The alligators, the 'immense gulph filled with water,' and the 'immense meadow' are all to be found in Bartram's account of the 'Great Sink' (Bartram, pp. 202-07; E. H. Coleridge, who refers to Bartram in his note, gives no specific reference). But there is still more conclusive evidence. In the 'Wanderings' itself (ll. 70-72) we read: 'The scene around was *desolate*; as far as the eye could reach it was *desolate*: the *bare rocks* faced each other, and left a long and wide interval of *thin white sand*.' At the top of Bartram's 218th page is this: 'the most *dreary, solitary, desert* waste I have ever beheld; groups of *bare rocks* emerging out of the naked gravel and drifts of *white sand*; the grass *thinly* scattered,' etc. Six lines later in the 'Wanderings' (ll. 78-81) comes this: 'the huge serpent often hissed there beneath the talons of the vulture, and the vulture screamed, his wings imprisoned within the coils of the serpent.' At the foot of the same 218th page in Bartram begins an account of the struggle between a hawk, with one wing imprisoned, and a great snake that 'threw himself in coils round [the] body' of the bird (pp. 218-19; this last parallel is also noted by Bersch, p. 101; see Hakluyt, X, 59, for a similar account of a struggle between an adder and a falcon). Coleridge's Siminole is only four pages earlier, and the Manate Spring just a dozen pages later in the book. We are in the thick of Coleridge's second 'cluster-point' in Bartram.

And as in 'Kubla Khan' Bartram's landscape merges with the cedars and the caverns of the Nile, so here it forms part of one picture with the cedars and the caverns of the Euphrates—as it had earlier been transferred, in 'Lewti,' to Circassia! And as in 'The Ancient Mariner' the known and familiar landscape of Nether Stowey lent its touches to the poem, so in the 'Wanderings' the scene is charged with reminiscences of the nearby Valley of Rocks. And as in 'The Ancient Mariner,' so here, dæmonic and angelic forces strive for the mastery, and here as there the victory is with the angels. And the old preoccupation with the elements appears in Cain's address to all of them. And that keen

interest in meteors which gave so large a place to the aurora and the dancing stars reappears in the luminous orb, which dances, like one of Priestley's *ignes fatui*, down 'those interminable precipices,' which are like the precipices of the legendary Nile that we have yet to see. In the diversity and multitudinousness of their elements, 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Wanderings of Cain' are of a piece.

Years later, in a remarkable passage in *Aids to Reflection* (Conclusion, pp. 383-86), the imagery which underlay 'Kubla Khan' and the 'Wanderings' came back, with rare beauty, to Coleridge's memory, and blended, for the last time, in a lovely phantasy.

29. *Poems*, I, 119, n. 1. See also p. 495, n. 31, above.

30. A. P., p. 17.

31. *Coleorton*, I, 221.

32. D. N. B., s.v. James Bruce.

33. Bruce, III, 596-97.

34. Bruce, III, 619-20. Paez's account is found in Athanasius Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus* (Rome, 1652), I, 57-58. The pertinent portion is as follows:

Secundus fons vergit a primo in orientem ad iactum lapidis, huius profunditatem explorantes, immissa lancea 12 palmorum, fundum nullum invenimus; colligatisque duabus lanceis 20 palmorum, denuo rem tentavimus, sed nec sic fundum tenere potuimus, dicuntque incolæ, totum montem plenum aquis, cuius hoc signum dabant, quod tota circa fontem planities tremula erat et bulliens, manifestum latentis aquae vestigium, eandemque ob causam non redundat aqua ad fontem, sed ad radices impetu maximo sese egerit; affirmabantque incolæ ... eo anno terram parum tremuisse ob magnam anni siccitatem, aliis vero annis ita tremere et bullire, ut vix sine periculo adire liceat.

In view of Bruce's skepticism regarding the genuineness of Paez's narrative as reported by Kircher, it may be well to refer the reader to the full text of his *History*, now accessible in the second and third volumes of *Rerum Æthiopicarum Scriptores occidentales inediti a sæculo XVI ad XIX*, ed. C. Beccari S. I. (P. Petri Paez S. I., *Historia Æthiopiæ*, Rome, 1905, II, 256 ff.). The passage which Kircher quotes is in II, 256.

Paez's account (again on Kircher's authority) was also easily accessible in the *Voyage to Abyssinia* (London, 1735, pp. 210-12, and cf. p. 98), ascribed to Father Jerome Lobo, and translated from the French of Le Grand by Dr. Johnson. It is found in Le Grand (*Voyage historique d'Abissinie, du R. P. Jerome Lobo*, Paris and La Haye, 1728), pp. 201 ff.; cf. pp. 106 ff. It is also given in part, and referred to Kircher, in Hiob Ludolf, *Historia Æthiopica* (Frankfort, 1681), Lib. I, cap. viii (sig. D3<sup>vo</sup>); Job Ludolphus, *A New History of Ethiopia*, Made English by J. P. Gent., London, 1682, pp. 35-36, 86. Coleridge could scarcely have missed it.

35. Bruce, III, 644. Compare III, 580: 'In this plain, the Nile winds more in the space of four miles than, I believe, any river in the world.' Lobo (p. 102) speaks of the 'windings' and the 'Mazes' of the Nile, and remarks that 'it wanders thro' a long maze of Windings' (p. 211).

36. Bartram, p. 165. 'Meander' is one of Bartram's favorite words. See, for example, pp. 53, 175, 197, 224, 316, 330, 333, 334, 339, 349, 354, 355, 356, 361, 386, 395, etc.

37. Bruce, III, 582-83.

38. See above, p. 7.

39. Bruce, III, 605.

40. Bruce, III, 648, 650.

41. Bruce, III, 158. In Ludolphus, *A New History of Ethiopia* (see Note 34, above), the name of the river is 'Astabora.'

42. Garnett (*The Poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 292) guessed at a connection between Abora and 'the Astaboras of the ancients,' but he overlooked Coleridge's close acquaintance with Bruce's work, and the important implications of that fact. (Incidentally, 'the Taccaze = terrible' is another name of the Astaboras, and not, as Garnett states, 'the principal affluent of this river.' See Bruce, III, 157-58.) Professor Lane Cooper (*Mod. Philol.*, III, 327-28) is aware of the fact that Coleridge knew Bruce. But he believes that 'there is in general not enough of the fabulous about Bruce to warrant the supposition that Coleridge is indebted to him for much of *Kubla Khan*,' and so he rejects Bruce's influence. But neither Garnett nor Cooper (of whose suggestions I was unaware when I first reached my own conclusions) had worked out the network of associations which bind the elements of 'Kubla Khan' together.
43. *Mod. Philol.*, III, 327-32.
44. P. L., IV, 268-75, 280-84.
45. *Lectures and Notes*, p. 525.
46. There is an extraordinary document which is evidence enough that such associations were less remote than we might think. It was written by a boy of eighteen, just twenty years before Coleridge's dream was dreamed. On December 4, 1778 ('being the full of the Moon') William Beckford, five years later the author of *Vathek*, wrote down, at Fonthill, an amazing reverie. It was not printed until 1910, and obviously Coleridge never saw it. As a 'psychological curiosity' it is interesting to the last degree, but I may quote here a few pertinent sentences only (Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill*, London, 1910, pp. 62-63):

Meanwhile my thoughts were wandering into the interior of Africa and dwelt for hours on those Countries I love. Strange tales of Mount Atlas and relations of Travellers amused my fancy. One instant I imagined myself viewing the marble palaces of Ethiopian princes seated on the green woody margin of Lakes. ... Some few minutes after, I found myself standing before a thick wood listening to impetuous water falls. ... I was wondering at the Scene when a tall comely Negro wound along the slopes of the Hills and without moving his lips made me comprehend I was in Africa, *on the brink of the Nile beneath the Mountains of Amara*. I followed his steps thro' an infinity of irregular Vales, all skirted with Rocks and blooming with an aromatic vegetation, till we arrived at the hollow Peak and ... a wide Cavern appeared before us. ... We entered the Cavern *and fell prostrate before the sacred source of the Nile which issues silently from a deep Gulph in the Rock*.

We may not forget, moreover, that the Happy Valley of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, was 'in the kingdom of Amhara' (*Rasselas*, chap. i), not far from the Nile. And *Rasselas* (with its strange cavern and its stream which 'entered a dark cleft of the mountain ... and fell with dreadful noise') may at least have helped to fix the name in Coleridge's memory. The great cavern, it may be added, had a massive iron gate which 'was opened to the sound of musick' (chap. i), and there were in the Happy Valley 'instruments of soft musick ... of which some played ... by the power of the stream' (chap. vi). But for many reasons I do not believe that this curious musick has any connection with 'the mingled measure from the fountain and the caves.'

The cave at Corycos of which Purchas (*Pilgrimage*, 1617, p. 382), following Pomponius Mela (Lib. I, cap. xiii), gives an account, 'terrifieth those that enter, with the multiplied sounds of Cymbals and uncouth ministralsie'; it has a subterranean river; and it is holy (*vere sacer*). Mela's description is very vivid, and some recollection of it may have lingered in Coleridge's memory. But I know no evidence that it did.

47. Bruce, III, 255; cf. 248-49.
48. P. L., IV, 248, 216, 229, 239, 223-25.
49. *Mod. Philol.*, III, 329-30.

50. Purchas (1617), Bk. VII, chap. v, §i, pp. 843-44.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 844.
52. 'And yet though thus admired of others, as a Paradise,' says Purchas, 'it is made a Prison to some.' Mount Amara and the secret pleasure-houses of the Old Man of the Mountain agree, then, even in the fact that both are Paradises which are at the same time prisons too. Like Xamdu, moreover, it is 'compassed with a wall'; from a lake upon it 'issueth a River, which having from these tops espied Nilus, never leaves seeking to finde him'; like Bartram's spot of enchantment it has its incense-bearing trees—'Oranges, Citrons, Limons, and the rest; Cedars, Palme-trees, with other trees ... to satisfie the sight, taste, and sent ... and the Balme tree, whereof there is great store' (Purchas, 1617, pp. 843-44).
53. Bruce, III, 589, 593, 563-64, 600, 634, 635-36.
54. *Ibid.*, IV, 65-67.
55. Fol. 45<sup>b</sup>; *Archiv*, p. 363.
56. 'The whole 107th page' has yet more to do with the moon: 'All their various ... fasts and festivals, are regulated by the course and age of the moon, and thence most of them take their particular denominations' (capitals Maurice's).
57. See above, p. 470, n. 137.
58. Maurice, I, 106-07.
59. Maurice continues (after a colon):

Two days before the *new moon*, there appears a bubble of ice, which increases in size every day till *the fifteenth day*, at which it is an ell or more in height; then as the moon decreases, the image also gradually diminishes, till at last no vestige of it remains.

The italics are in Maurice.

60. Fol. 47<sup>a</sup>; *Archiv*, p. 363.
61. Maurice, I, 105.
62. *Ibid.*, I, 102.
63. E. H. Coleridge (*Poems*, I, 298, n. i) refers to the entry in the Note Book, and to the 107th page of Maurice, but makes no comment.
64. Maurice, I, 12-13.
65. Fol. 47<sup>a</sup>; *Archiv*, p. 363. For Major Rennell, see above, pp. 33-34.
66. James Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*, Third edition, London, 1793, pp. 143-45.
67. *Faust*, Pt. I, ll. 1922-27. For '[Traum-Fabrik]' read, of course, in the original, 'Gedanken-Fabrik.'
68. Rennell, *Memoir*, p. 133 (italics mine); cf. pp. 137, 143.
69. Maurice, I, 36-37: 'Bernier, whose curious and entertaining account of part of the Mogul Empire ... and of his journey to Cashmire with the Emporer Aurengzeb ... fails not on every fresh reading to give new pleasure.'
70. Maurice, I, 109-10.
71. It is in Churchill's great *Collection of Voyages*, VIII (= Osborne II), 102-[245].
72. Churchill, VIII (as above), 227.
73. *Ibid.*, VIII, 237.
74. *Ibid.*, VIII, 243. Coleridge could not have surpassed over p. 242 without reading it!
75. *Ibid.*, VIII, 228-29.
76. *Ibid.*, VIII, 234.
77. *Ibid.*, VIII, 234, 227, 228-29.
78. *Ibid.*, VIII, 233.
79. *Ibid.*, VIII, 229.
80. *Ibid.*, VIII, 234.
81. *Ibid.*, VIII, 193 (= 195).

82. Bartram, pp. 166, 231.
83. See, for example, Pausanias, II, 5; Philostratus, *Vita Apollon.*, I, 20; Strabo, VI, ii, 9; Pliny, *Natur. Hist.*, V, 9(10), 52; Seneca, *Natur. Quaest.*, VI, 8; Lucan, *Pharsalia*, X, 190 ff.; Solinus, XXXII, 4-5; etc.
84. Burnet, S. T., I, 226.
85. *Ibid.*, I, 253.
86. Bruce, III, 619-20. Cf. Note 34, above.
87. I wish there were space for the list of them here. The titles may easily be seen in Graesse, *Trésor de livres rares et précieux*, IV, 20-22; and the lover of dead learning which was once alive may find both diversion and a *memento mori* by turning over some of the volumes themselves.
88. *Ibid.*, I, 52:

Nomen secundi fluvii Gihhon (qui et Nilus dicitur) hic omnem terram Chus percurrit; nam simul ac paradisum egreditur, infra profunda maris et Oceani vada dilapsus, hinc rursus per occultos terræ meatus emergit in montibus Æthiopicis. ... Sed urgebit, inquit, aliquis, qui fieri possit, ut fluvii illi e paradiso egressi sub Oceani vada et cor maris præcipitentur, atque inde tandem in hac terra nostra emergant? ... Deinde hoc quoque asserimus, paradisum multo sublimiore regione positum esse, quam hæc terra nostra, ac proinde fieri, ut illinc per immania subterraneorum meatuum præcipitia delabantur fluvii, tanto cum impetu impuls, coarctatique sub maris fundum rapiantur, unde rursus emergant, ebulliantque in hoc orbe nostro.

89. Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus* (Romae, 1652), I, 53-54.
90. *Ibid.*, I, 55: Verum Odoardus id negat cum aliis horum locorum incolis, qui affirmant unanimiter Nilum mox ubi egressus est lacum, per horribiles quasdam et impenetrabiles valles, per præcipitia hominibus inaccessa ac deserta invia præcipitatum, ita profundissimis vallibus abscondi, ut ipsis intimis terræ visceribus exceptus videatur, abyssisque absorptus. ... Hinc vero aliis fluminibus auctus inter angustas montium valles devectus, perque catadupas in humiles Ægypti campos præceps actus, tandem multiplici gyro in mediterraneum mare dilabitur.
91. *Ibid.*, I, maps between pp. 52-53.
92. Bartram, p. 226.
93. Kircher, *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, I, 58.
94. *Ibid.*, I, 57.
95. Lobo, *Voyage to Abyssinia* (1735), p. 98.
96. *Notes*, p. 283; cf. *Table Talk*, Aug. 15, 1833.
97. Herodotus, II, 28. Rawlinson's translation (London, 1862), II, 31.
98. See Lowes. *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927, pp. 159, 502, n. 28.
99. *Æneid*, III, 694-96.
100. Burnet, S. T., I, 112-13.
101. Taylor, *Pausanias*, I, xii.
102. *Letters*, I, 181.
103. Taylor, *Pausanias*, II, 381-82. The passage translated is Bk. VIII, ch. liv, § 2 of the *Description of Greece*. I quote Taylor's translation only because Coleridge had probably read it. Incidentally, it was in Wordsworth's library (*Trans. Wordsworth Soc.*, VI, 213, No. 147). For a more accurate rendering see Sir James G. Frazer's *Pausanias* (London, 1898), I, 443.
104. Taylor, *Pausanias*, II, 18 (Bk. V, ch. vii, §§ 2-3). See Frazer, I, 245.
105. A. P., p. 152; *Notes*, p. 312; *Table Talk*, Aug. 20, 1833.
106. *Geography*, VI, ii, 4 (C 270).
107. *Ibid.*, VI, ii, 4 (C 271).
108. *Ibid.*, VI, ii, 9 (C 275). I have used the translation of Professor H. L. Jones, in the Loeb Classical Library (III, 75, 79, 91-92).

109. *Letters*, I, 180.
110. *Miscellanies*, p. 179 (cf. p. 89); *Table Talk*, June 26, 1830.
111. *Quæstiones Naturales*, III, xxvi, 4.
112. *Ibid.*, VI, viii, 1-3.
113. *Ibid.*, VI, vii, 5. I am using the translation of John Clarke, *Physical Science in the Time of Nero* (London, 1910), pp. 142, 235, 234.
114. Bernardus Ramazzinus, *Opera omnia* (1716), p. 260. See Burnet, S. T., I, 272.
115. *Argonauticon*, VIII, 90-91.
116. Purchas (1617), p. 472.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 470.
118. *Ibid.*, p. 471.
119. Bruce, IV, 129-30. There is a curious account in Benyowski which Coleridge must have read, of a Kamschatkan sorcerer who prophesies vengeance for 'the death of the spirits of our fathers whom the Russians have cut off' (*Memoirs*, I, 185-86).
120. *An Arabian Tale*, etc. (*The History of the Caliph Vathek*), London, 1786, pp. 2-5, 23-24, 35-36; *Vathek*, Lausanne, 1787, pp. 2-4, 22-23, 33-34; *Vathek*, *Conte Arabe*, Paris, 1787, pp. 4-5, 19-20, 27.
121. Ed. 1786 (London), p. 37; ed. 1787 (Lausanne), p. 35; ed. 1787 (Paris), pp. 27-28.
122. Fol. 21<sup>a</sup> (*Archiv*, p. 352); fol. 25<sup>a</sup> (*Archiv*, p. 354).
123. *Letters*, I, 196. Italics Coleridge's. See context for sense of 'impassioned.'
124. 'The Passions,' II, 60-68.
125. I am indebted to a note in *The Nation and Athenæum*, Vol. XXX, pp. 664-66 (Jan. 28, 1922), for the reminiscences of 'The Passions,' and for the note, in turn, to the watchful eye of Mr. John Bakeless. For the application of the facts, however, I am responsible.
126. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, I, 582.
127. I shall give but one of these guesses. Coleridge made memorandum, as we saw long ago (pp. 30, 161, above), to read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters*. If he did, he read this—a dozen pages only from the stars that 'darted forward':

Coming to the conflux of the various cataracts, rushing from different falls, struggling with the *huge* masses of rock, and *rebounding* from the profound cavities, I ... acknowledg[ed] that it was indeed a grand object. A little island stood in the midst ... which, by dividing the torrent, rendered it more picturesque; one part appearing to issue from a *dark cavern*, that fancy might easily imagine a *vast fountain*, throwing up its waters from the very centre of the earth (*Letters written during a short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, London, 1796, pp. 189-90).

Did that perhaps lend a word or two, at least, to '*Huge* fragments vaulted like *rebounding* hail'? The links are there, and it is not impossible.

128. Mr. Graves's interpretation is found in his book, *The Meaning of Dreams* (London, 1924), pp. 145-58. And since scrupulous accuracy in the minutest details is admittedly a *sine qua non* in psycho-analysis (witness the rigorous exactness displayed in the analysis of dreams by Mr. Graves's master, Dr. Rivers) it may not be amiss to examine briefly Mr. Graves's account of the setting of Coleridge's dream, since upon this his whole analysis depends. I shall consider three points only, all of which are fundamental to the proposed interpretation. Mr. Graves's assumption throughout that as early as 1798 Coleridge was a confirmed user of opium need not be considered here, since in Chapter XXI in Lowe's *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927, (written before *The Meaning of Dreams* appeared), that question is discussed.

Mr. Graves finds the key to a significant element in the latent meaning of the dream in Coleridge's relations with his wife, and his authority is the well-known passage in Thomas De Quincey. 'In De Quincey's *Reminiscences of the English Lake Poets*,' we read (Graves, p. 148), 'an account is given of



the relations existing *about this time* [italics mine] between Coleridge, his wife and Dorothy Wordsworth,' and Mr. Graves's next four pages are given over to an excerpt, not always accurately quoted, from De Quincey's narrative. 'About this time' (the preceding paragraph leaves the reference unmistakable) was May, 1798; De Quincey's visit occurred in July or August, 1807 (*Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1834, pp. 509-17; Campbell, *Narrative*, pp. 161-63); and his account of it, from which the quotation is drawn, was written in 1834. The interpretation of a dream of 1798, accordingly, is based on a statement of conditions *as they existed (or were reported at second or third hand) in 1807, more than nine years later*. That is enough; but it is not without pertinence to recall that even this account was written twenty-seven years after the visit, and that, as James Dykes Campbell puts it (*Narrative*, p. 161, n. 5), 'the whole article bristles with blunders of every description.' Of De Quincey's notorious untrustworthiness as a witness, especially in this famous article, Mr. Graves is apparently unaware.

The next point (made, like the first, in entire good faith) is even more misleading, if that is possible. For Mr. Graves has been himself misled, through failure to consult the original of another statement on which he builds his case. I quote from *The Meaning of Dreams*, p. 153:

Brandt [by whom Brandl is meant], in his life of Coleridge, discusses the effect of opium on the poet. 'After a dose he would sleep—a deep sleep of the outer senses for three hours during which all life centred morbidly in the imagination. A country bower among green hills appeared to his inward sight; his beloved lay fondly at his side; music sounded and a prophetic mood possessed him inspiring both surprise and awe. This was a favorite idyllic situation with him, the same that meets us first in *The Aeolian Harp*; even the "circling honey drops" the paradisaal sweetness, with melody in addition, repeated themselves in this mood.' Brandt [so again] then relates how the poem came to be written.

The passage (quoted by Mr. Graves with nine slight variations from the text as printed) is from Lady Eastlake's authorized translation (1887, p. 184) of Brandl's *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1886). 'After a dose *he would sleep*'—that can mean only one thing: a *general* statement regarding 'the effect of opium on the poet,' and it carries with it, as part of such a statement of a uniform effect, all the details which follow it. Now there are few more untrustworthy translations than Lady Eastlake's rendering of Brandl's book, and this is only one case in point. What Brandl wrote was this: 'Darnach dürfte die Medicin, die er—nach seinem eigenen Berichte—*auf dem genannten Ausflug* anwendete, aber nicht näher bezeichnet, Opium gewesen sein. *Als bald trat ein tiefer, dreistündiger Schlaf der äusseren Sinne ein,*' etc. (p. 192). Brandl is describing *this* dream—the dream from which 'Kubla Khan' arose—and this dream only; and Lady Eastlake's 'would sleep,' which has not the slightest warrant in the text, completely (however unintentionally) subverts the sense. And the blunder is twice repeated a few lines later. 'Just before *one of these sleeps*,' she translates (p. 184), 'Coleridge had read in Purchas' "Pilgrimage,"' etc. Brandl's words are (p. 193): 'Coleridge hatte unmittelbar *vor dem Einschlafen* ["before he fell asleep," i.e., in the farm house] in Purchas' "Pilgerschaft" ... gelesen,' etc. And again, in the same paragraph, when Brandl writes (still explicitly of this one occasion): 'Kaum erwacht, begann er niederzuschreiben' (p. 194), Lady Eastlake translates: 'Hardly awake *from these trances*, he would begin to write' (p. 185; the italics throughout the quotations are mine). Comment is fruitless. In a word, through following a flagrant mistranslation Mr. Graves has mistaken a specific statement about *this* dream for a general statement about Coleridge's *other* dreams, and has then proceeded to employ this spurious generalization as evidence in interpreting the very dream which alone it was meant to describe. A more hopelessly vicious circle it would be difficult to conceive. The other curious mistranslations in the passage need not detain us, but one statement of Brandl's (which Lady Eastlake has again misinterpreted) must.

'His beloved lay fondly at his side' ('die Geliebte schmiegte sich an seine Seite'). As for that, there are two or three things to be observed. First, there is no 'beloved' (Geliebte) at Coleridge's side in 'Kubla Khan.' Second, we know nothing about Coleridge's 'usual opium dreams' (I am quoting Mr. Graves); all that is a pure figment of Lady Eastlake's mistranslation. Third, 'lay fondly,' as a translation of 'schmiegte,' reads into Brandl's phrase a sense which Brandl (whose own slip is serious enough without that) did not put there. Lady Eastlake (and this time it is not to be wondered at) has missed the point of Brandl's confusing (and confused) exposition. For he is assuming that in 'Kubla Khan' we have Coleridge's 'idyllische Lieblingssituation' (pp. 192-93), *which he proceeds to describe in terms of 'The Eolian Harp.'* And in the opening lines of 'The Eolian Harp' Coleridge's 'Geliebte' (who is 'my pensive Sara'!) sits with '[her] soft cheek reclined Thus on [his] arm' (*Poems*, I, 100)—in other words, 'die Geliebte schmiegte sich an seine Seite.' That is the situation which Brandl is sketching, as anyone who reads the passage on pp. 192-93 of the German text will see. His transfer of this situation to 'Kubla Khan' is wholly without warrant, and Lady Eastlake's translation is equally untenable. Both text and translation are this time at fault. In other words, 'The Eolian Harp' is not an opium dream; 'Kubla Khan' is the only opium dream of Coleridge's which we possess; there is no beloved lying fondly at his side in either. Why Mr. Graves should not have gone straight to the dreamer himself (i.e., to the only transcript of the dream which has survived: to wit, the poem), instead of resting his case at third-hand on a crass mistranslation and a conjectural beloved, it is difficult, in view of his emphasis on scientific method, to understand. And inasmuch as the 'Geliebte' on whom Brandl rests *his* case was Coleridge's wife, Mr. Graves's hypothesis (see the last paragraph of the quotation below) assumes a slightly humorous aspect. I have dwelt on this hopeless *mélange* of blunders only because they constitute the sole foundation of an exposition which claims to be based on 'science and logic and commonsense' (p. 166).

These are the chief premises on which Mr. Graves's conclusions rest. 'Here then,' he goes on, 'is the setting; what of the interpretation?' Well, here it is (pp. 156-58):

It is best to start with the easiest part of the symbolism and work back to the less obvious. The last part of the poem, then, seems to be closely connected with the opium-eating conflict, a justification of these habits on the ground that the vivid and emotional visions which the drug gives him will one day be translated into a poetry that will stagger the world. This part of the poem is also closely connected with those dreams of disappointed ambition which I described in an earlier chapter; he is making himself half-divine on the strength of his genius, not only to impress his friends who are losing confidence in him, but also as a weapon against his ambitious and disillusioned wife.

His attitude towards his wife in this matter makes a connecting link, as I read the poem, with the earlier part. Coleridge is evidently thinking of himself in terms of the serene and powerful Kubla. It must be noticed that the pleasure dome, the delightful bower into which Coleridge always [Lady Eastlake's 'would sleep' has had its perfect work] retired under the influence of opium, was built midway between the haunted and half-human chasm from which the stream issued and the gloomy caverns into which it sank, a retreat from both.

But even this idyllic spot was not secure from the gloomy prophecies uttered from afar. I do not think it fanciful to suggest that these distant voices were in one sense, those of Lamb and Lloyd making their gloomy prophecies as to the fate of the drugtaker [where are these prophecies found? One would give much to see them]; in another they were probably the reminder that while the life of England was threatened by war with France, it was hardly the duty of an Englishman, even a

genius, to bury himself far off in the West Country and weaken his spirit with opium.

What of the romantic chasm and the woman wailing for her demon lover? I would suggest that this refers to the former strong passion that Coleridge had felt for his wife who was now bitterly reproaching him for his supposed unfaithfulness; but I will not insist on this interpretation. The caves into which this river sinks to run underground in the lifeless ocean would represent in this sense the Berkeley Coleridge part of the story, his wife's condition at the time [Mr. Graves has earlier pointed out that Berkeley Coleridge was born May 14, 1798] complicating his attitude towards her and making her reproaches on the ground of his unfaithfulness still more bitter, so that the retreat was more needed than ever. In a more general sense the river is probably also the life of man, from birth to death; we understand from the poem that Coleridge has determined to shun the mazy complications of life by retreating to a bower of poetry, solitude and opium. The caves of ice are puzzling. We do not know who the beloved was who lay fondly at his side in his usual opium dreams, certainly it was not his wife at this time [further comment is unnecessary]. For Dorothy, Coleridge's admiration was an intellectual one only, as De Quincey makes clear, so that the caves of ice are possibly a symbolic way of saying that thoughts of a passionate nature did not disturb his serene retreat.

Guessing, like glozing, 'is a glorious thing certeyn!' But if this interpretation is to be regarded as an analysis based on scientific principles, I can only repeat that the evidence offered in support of it is worse than valueless. And I suspect that psychoanalysis as applied to works of the imagination will gain the confidence of scholars only when the analysts master at firsthand the evidence which they employ. Then conclusions may at least be tested, and accepted or rejected or amended, as dispassionate consideration of the evidence decrees. With genuinely scientific essays to discover truth no student of literature can ever quarrel. And in this note I have been far more concerned with a principle than with a case.

Attempts at symbolic interpretations of 'Kubla Khan' with no relation to dream psychology are common enough. They are for the most part (except to their only begetters) wildly improbable, and it does not fall within my purpose to discuss them. A typical example may be found in Charles D. Stewart, *Essays on the Spot* (Boston and New York, 1910), pp. 105-89.

## Criticism: Harold Bloom (essay date 1961)

SOURCE: Bloom, Harold. "'Kubla Khan.'" In *Coleridge: The Ancient Mariner and Other Poems, A Casebook*, edited by Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman, pp. 217-20. London, England: Macmillan, 1973.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1961, Bloom views "Kubla Khan" as a work of romantic self-recognition, and of the reconciliation of opposites within the poetic imagination.]

'Kubla Khan' is a poem of self-recognition, in which the figure of the youth as virile poet is finally identified with the poem's speaker. Behind Coleridge's poem is Collins' masterpiece of a poet's incarnation, the 'Ode on the Poetical Character', and the dark fates of Collins himself, the young Chatterton, Smart, and the other doomed bards of sensibility. These are the rich-haired youths of Morn, Apollo sacrifices who precede Coleridge in his appearance with flashing eyes and floating hair in the last lines of 'Kubla Khan.' In Blake's myth such a youth is a form of the rising Orc, the fiery dawn of a new Beulah or increase in sensual fulfilment, but an Adonis as well as an Apollo, a dawn that is merely cyclic in nature, an outburst of energy in which the organic and the creative are uneasily allied. The young poets of 'Alastor' and 'Endymion', with

their dark and glorious destinies, and their sense of both embodying nature and yet being imprisoned by it, are later forms of Coleridge's myth. The old poet of 'Sailing to Byzantium' with his deliberate voyage out of nature is the fitting dying fall for the Romantic tradition of tragic poetic self-recognition.

Internally, 'Kubla Khan' is no fragment but a vision of creation and destruction, each complete. It is not quite a 'poem about the act of poetic creation,' for it contains that theme as one element in a more varied unity, just as Yeats's 'Byzantium' does.

Kubla Khan and Xanadu belong to the *given* of the poem; we need to accept them without asking why *this* potentate or *this* place. Kubla has power and can command magnificence; that is enough. He builds a dome of pleasure for himself, as the rulers of Byzantium built a greater dome to honor God. But the Byzantine dome, while apt for Yeats's purposes, is too theological for Coleridge's poem. Kubla builds the dome for himself, and the poet with his music will build a dome in air, matching and at length overgoing the mightiest of human material power. The orthodox censor in Coleridge gives him the remote dome in Xanadu, and avoids the issue of the poet's relative sanctity against more than natural verities.

Kubla picks his spot with precision. A sacred river runs into the ground at just the point where the great dome is decreed. Beneath the dome is the underground river, running in measureless caverns down to a sunless sea. The dome rises above an artificial paradise, ten miles in diameter, including both elaborate gardens and ancient forests. Amid these forests is a chasm from which a fountain suddenly bursts, part earthquake, part geyser. 'Momently' the underground river is forced up and runs five miles above ground until it reaches the caverns again and sinks down. In this sudden upheaval the fountain evidently comes up near the dome, as that is at the midpoint of the enclosure.

Now it is clear that this upheaval is only a momentary affair; Coleridge emphasizes this by saying 'momently' twice, in lines 19 and 24. And so the miracle of rare device of line 35 is only momentary also. Just once in this upheaval, which is to Kubla a presage of the contrary of his pleasure garden ('ancestral voices prophesying war'), Kubla and we can visualize the following phenomena intimately associated: the dome (with sunlight upon it), the dome's shadow floating midway upon the waves of the seething, forced-up river; the fountain geyser with its hurling rocks, just next to the dome; and the exposed icy caverns beneath, from which the fountain has momentarily removed the covering earth. The effect is apocalyptic, for what is revealed is a natural miracle:

It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

The river, now raised again, is sacred. The chasm is holy and enchanted, and is associated with waning moonlight. The river comes up as the fountain before it settles down again, and so the fountain is sacred too, and the fragments of earth flung up in it take on the orderly associations of the sacred; they are dancing rocks. The exposed caverns are icy; the dome is sunny. What is exposed is holy; what was built for exposure is representative of a perfect pleasure, the dome being necessarily a perfect hemisphere.

At the midpoint of the momentarily flung-up river we see and hear, together, the extraordinary sight of the shadow of the pleasure dome, and the mingled music of the bursting fountain and the exposed underground current. As the contraries of sun and moon, dome and cavern, light and dark, heat and ice meet, Kubla hears the voices of the dead speaking to the living within a scene of peace and prophesying war. The momentary upheaval itself is the contrary and answer of nature to Kubla's decree of the power of art. The fountain rises suddenly like Blake's wind of Beulah or Shelley's West Wind, to create and destroy, to bring sun and ice together. The very sign of the fountain's potential for destruction is also an emblem of 'chaffy grain beneath the thrasher's flail,' and the sexual intimations of the poem are undeniable, though they are subordinated to and subsumed by the more general theme of creation and destruction.

Kubla had not sought the balance or reconciliation of opposites which Coleridge and Blake alike saw as the mark of the creative imagination, but momentarily his dome and the bursting fountain together do present a vision of such a balance; the landscape becomes a poem, and the imagination has its manifestation. The triumphal chant that follows is Coleridge's assertion that he as poet can build a finer dome and a more abiding paradise than Kubla's, and one that would have both convex heat and concave ice without the necessity of earthquake. Coleridge's music would be 'loud and long'; Kubla's is momentary.

The earthly paradise traditionally takes one of its alternate placings in Abyssinia. The crucial passage here is in *Paradise Lost*:

Mount Amara, though this by some suppos'd  
True Paradise under the Ethiop Line  
By Nilus head, enclos'd with shining Rock.

(iv 281-3)

This is Coleridge's Mount Abora, and his Abyssinian maid, in singing of it, is celebrating Paradise. Once the poet saw her in vision; if he now revives *within* himself her song of Eden he will enter a state of such deep delight:

That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves in ice!

He would rival Kubla's decreed dome, and also produce the imaginative miracle of the juxtaposed contraries, and without the equivocal aid of the paradoxical upheaval that simultaneously creates and threatens the destruction of the 'rare device.' For this is the potential of the poetic imagination to create more lastingly than even Nature and Art can do together. And could he do this, he would be a reincarnation of the young Apollo. Those who heard his song would *see* his visionary creation, for that is the inventive power of poetry. And they would grant him the awe due to the youth who has eaten the fruit and drunk the milk of the Eden forbidden to them, or open only through vicarious participation in the poet's vision:

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

## Criticism: Richard Gerber (essay date 1963)

SOURCE: Gerber, Richard. "Keys to 'Kubla Khan.'" *English Studies* 44, no. 5 (October 1963): 321-41.

[In the following essay, Gerber traces a "fundamental dialectic principle" in "Kubla Khan," featured in a coalescence of references to Kubla and the Roman mother-goddess Cybele, as well as in the structure of the poem itself.]

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.

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!  
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momently 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 momently the sacred river.  
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!

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!

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.  
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,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (1)

It is fairly safe to say that no poem in the English language has provided more pages of comment per line than 'Kubla Khan.' Even if we disregard the large volume of separate articles it remains in an unique position since it is the only 54-line poem to have inspired three voluminous books of criticism.<sup>2</sup> These books and articles offer innumerable keys to an understanding of the poem. Some of these keys seem to fit and give access to larger and smaller, to more central and more peripheral chambers of the enigmatical structure. But although we get to know more and more about the poem there seem to be still further mysterious chambers that have not been opened yet. So the few keys offered here will possibly be welcome. Some of them may open only

minor chambers, but I think that there is at least one—fantastically absurd though it will appear at first sight in its deceptive simplicity—that will open an important secret chamber at the very heart of the poem.

## I

### DREAM AND ARTIFACT

The first question I should like to consider is a preliminary one. It concerns the nature of the relation between the dream composition and the conscious literary artifact. According to Coleridge 'Kubla Khan' is a dream-composition, based on a passage from Purchas which he read before starting to dream. Lowes accepted this statement in *The Road to Xanadu* and corroborated it. Elisabeth Schneider tried to refute this claim in *Coleridge, Opium and 'Kubla Khan.'* The truth lies somewhere between the extremes.

Since the discovery of the Crewe MS<sup>3</sup> there cannot be any doubt that Coleridge worked on the surface of the poem in full daylight consciousness. Only two changes need be mentioned here to illustrate this. In the Crewe MS lines 6 and 7 read as follows:

So twice six miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were compass'd round.

The printed version has:

So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round.

The first version is closer to Coleridge's original in Purchas: 'encompassing sixteene miles.' The second version has a more enchanting, almost hypnotically intoxicating sound-pattern. Three sibilant s-sounds have been eliminated, while the i-diphthong now occurs four times in a line, in a kind of incantatory repetition. Moreover 'girdled' provides an assonant echo to 'fertile', so that 'fertile ground' and 'girdled round' can almost be regarded as double rhymes.

The second change I should like to consider concerns *Mount Abora* in line 41. In the Crewe MS *Abora* was still *Amara* as in *Paradise Lost*. Then Coleridge changed this to *Amora*, and then to *Abora* in the printed version. Why? I think we can guess if we look at lines 40/41 in their original state.

And on her dulcimer she played  
Singing of Mount Amara.

Although *dulci* and *amara* are not semantically opposed to each other in this case, the reader may easily be led to think of a girl playing on a sweet instrument, singing of a bitter mountain, which contradicts the poet's intention. *Amora* which replaced *Amara* is so close to *Amor* that there is the danger of an allegorical interpretation. In selecting *Abora* Coleridge escapes both these disturbing possibilities.

But in spite of such minor amendments the poem retains its dreamlike character in its abrupt shifts and changes, which makes it extremely unlikely that the poem was consciously elaborated in its main features. I hope to give some proof later on to justify this agreement with Coleridge and the large majority of critics. But in spite of this conviction I should like to regard the poem as a more consciously contrived work of art than John Beer in *Coleridge the Visionary* and some other critics do. Especially the important passage near the beginning of the poem leaves room for doubt regarding the dreamlike nature of the poem:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

These lines do not fit into the dreamlike sequence of the first two stanzas. A dream may have strange sudden shifts and changes but hardly jumps about in this particular manner: it does not neatly and succinctly interpolate a passage in the middle of a text which keeps fairly closely to the original in Purchas, in order to sum up and anticipate a picture that occurs much later in the more natural dreamlike sequence of events:

... the sacred river ran

Then reached the caverns measureless to man  
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean.

If we exclude the three lines near the beginning the development continues without a break to the end of the second stanza. First there is the building of the pleasure-dome and the encircling of the landscape more or less as we find it in Purchas: 'In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure.'<sup>4</sup> Then there is a shift in the poem to something different, 'forests ancient as the hills.' This phrase stands midway between the character of the landscape in the first and the second stanza. In the hilly forests there is a chasm and a mighty fountain springs up. Then we follow the course of the river coming from the fountain until it disappears in the caverns.

If lines 3-5, which interrupt this continuous development, do form a part of the dream-composition they had better be regarded as part of a later stage in the compositional dream-work. Although there can never be any certainty about the complex processes of a dream in a mind like Coleridge's, it seems advisable not to start with an attempt to establish an associative connection between Kubla Khan and the river Alph right away, as Beer does, for this would force us to indulge in some wild flights of fancy, of which Beer's book is by no means free.

## II

### PLEASURE-DOME

But at first we do not have to go beyond the second line of the poem anyway.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree.

Purchas does not mention a dome, only a house and a palace. Why *dome*? Elisabeth Schneider calls *dome* a 'self-echo', for this is not the only time that Coleridge uses the word. Beer sees the origin of *dome* in domelike temples of which Coleridge may have read.

We need not stray so far. Wherever possible we shall restrict our enquiries to Coleridge's own poetical work. But this does not mean that we need reduce the reason for Coleridge's choice of the word to the fullness of its sound, as Elisabeth Schneider does. Coleridge had used the word *dome* before in order to express the quintessence of sensual oriental pleasure.

Hence the soft couch, and many-coloured robe,  
The timbrel, and arched dome and costly feast. (5)

Since he had used it thus at a decisive point in one of his most ambitious earlier poems he could unconsciously have chosen it again as a much more significant and specialized term than either *house* or *palace*.



But there is a deeper meaning behind this connection. *Dome* in 'Religious Musings' is not an isolated symbol but part of an evolutionary context which is thematically related to Kubla Khan's historical situation. In the passage from which I have quoted we first see the primitive nomad moving over the grassland with vacant mind. Then imagination takes root and the nomad wants to acquire property, and becomes sedentary and luxury-loving, and erects a dome of pleasure. If Coleridge had been consciously looking for a prototype symbolising this evolutionary change he could hardly have found a more representative figure in his oriental context than the Mongol Kubla Khan who established himself in China.

### III

#### ANCESTRAL VOICES PROPHESYING WAR

The decreeing of the pleasure-dome and the encircling of the gardens constitute the only action in the poem that is related to Kubla Khan. The only hint of a different action connected with him occurs at the end of the second stanza:

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war.

This double aspect of the Kubla Khan action, *pleasure-dome* on the one hand, *war* on the other hand, also closely corresponds to the ideas expressed in the evolutionary passage from 'Religious Musings', for luxury is only one of the forces that at first disturb man but may lead him on to higher thoughts and spheres of life:

From Luxury and War

Sprang heavenly Science; and from Science Freedom. (6)

But the dialectic evolution through these two negative-positive forces, luxury and war, is not developed in 'Kubla Khan.' We know that Coleridge considered 'Kubla Khan' a fragment and that he thought of continuing the poem. Some of his notes seem to point in the direction of an eastern potentate evolving towards Heavenly Science and Freedom. We read: 'Kublai Khan ordered letters to be invented for his people.'<sup>7</sup> Coleridge further makes an entry which is concerned with an oriental Khan who changed from an eastern despot to a benevolent philosopher of the age of reason.<sup>8</sup> But there are so many entries in the *Notebooks* that two isolated hints do not throw much light on a possible continuation of the poem. All we can say is that the poem remains a fragment as far as the action centering on Kubla Khan is concerned.

### IV

#### FORESTS ANCIENT AS THE HILLS

Between *pleasure-dome* at the beginning of the first stanza and *war* at the end of the second stanza two different types of landscape make their appearance, a pleasant garden on the one hand, savage hills on the other. If we exclude lines 3-5 the first sign of the second landscape, which is not found in Purchas, appears in 'Forests ancient as the hills.' Lowes tried to locate the associative origin of these mysterious forests in an oriental palm-grove, but this hardly evokes the picture created in one's mind by Coleridge's phrase. Elisabeth Schneider in this case shows more regard for the atmosphere of the poem by associating these forests with the forests of Germany. But even if Coleridge had written 'Kubla Khan' after his stay in Germany, as Elisabeth Schneider contends, there is no reason why he should associate the German forests with Kubla Khan's pleasure-garden. Perhaps the explanation lies nearer at hand. If we look at the passage in Purchas we notice that there is one element that has not been used by Coleridge: 'all sorts of beasts of chase and game.' But this phrase is so closely associated with forests that it can easily evoke their image. The O.E.D. defines one main meaning of *forest* as 'woodland district, usually belonging to the king, set apart for hunting wild beasts and

game.’ But even if this should be the origin of these forests, their description *ancient as the hills*, which seems more closely connected with the second stanza, remains mysterious.

## V

### **A SAVAGE PLACE, HOLY AND ENCHANTED, WOMAN WAILING FOR HER DEMON LOVER, THIS EARTH IN FAST THICK PANTS BREATHING**

As no critic could fail to see, the landscape of the second stanza of the poem is quite different from that of the first stanza. Instead of gardens there is a savage place, instead of fertile ground there are hills and a chasm, instead of Kubla Khan there appears a woman wailing for her demon lover, instead of quietly enfolded sunny spots of greenery and pleasant sinuous rills there is an earth heaving and rhythmically panting, giving birth to a huge fountain and river. But why this strange shift should have occurred has never been satisfactorily explained. Lowes has located a number of isolated ‘hooked atoms’ which contribute to this picture, but there is no reason at all why just this particular picture should have emerged from an atomistic chaos. Thousands of other combinations of hooked atoms might have been possible. Beer gives an explanation which throws more light on this stanza but also forces it into a cabalistic straitjacket, in an interpretation in which the destructive aspect of fallen *natura naturata* is given too much prominence. His final explanation lies in seeing this part of the poem as an expression of ‘Typhonic forces’ corresponding to the destructive Typhonic sun in ‘The Ancient Mariner.’ Other critics perceive various archetypal oppositions. All these interpretations contribute to an understanding of this stanza, but I suggest that we have to look for a different, more particular, more strangely consistent dreamlike way of shaping and transforming the original data in order to find the creative source of this stanza.

Since Freud and his successors we all know about the condensation (*Verdichtung*) and the shifting (*Verschiebung*) that takes place in dreams. We also know of the special importance of the identity or similarity in words or names. In our connection the best example for such a dream that I know of occurs in a book by Werner Kemper.<sup>9</sup> Kemper one night had a dream about a Professor Leonhard whom he had met many years ago. On waking he wondered why he should have dreamt of this man. He remembered that among the many books on his writing-table there was one by Professor Leonhard. On checking this he found that the book by Leonhard was accidentally lying on the top of a pile of books there, so that his eye must unconsciously have rested on the name before he went to bed. He first wanted to leave it at that although certain features of the Leonhard in the dream did not fit the real Leonhard. Being an expert in dreams he followed these clues and found that the shape of the head in the dream belonged to another professor whose name was Volhard. But his shoulders and his voice belonged neither to Leonhard nor Volhard but to another professor again, whose name was Lehnartz. So we see that in this case we have three persons in one. This condensation was favoured by the similarity of the persons’ names for *Leonhard* can be regarded as a portmanteau word formed by a combination of *Lehnartz* and *Volhard*. Moreover the three persons have certain common characteristics so that they can be more easily connected. They are all professors.

To sum up: We have first a surface-name which was suggested by having been read before the reader went to sleep. We have a dream picture which after the reader’s waking up is only remembered by that surface-name and which partly corresponds to the picture designated by the surface-name. But certain important features do not correspond to it. An analysis shows that these disturbing features belong to persons whose names are contained in and suggested by the surface-name. Moreover, some of the characteristics of these persons correspond to some of the characteristics belonging to the person designated by the surface-name.

If we apply this to our poem the ‘surface-name’ is certainly *Kubla Khan*, or just *Kubla* as in the second stanza, or *Cubla* as in the Crewe MS, or *Cublai* as in the passage by Purchas which Coleridge read before going to sleep. But what then is the hidden being whose name is related to Kubla-Cubla-Cublai and which suggests savage nature, holiness and enchantment, a woman wailing for her demon lover, an earth rhythmically

pulsating giving birth? I suggest that this hidden being, which has puzzled generations of critics and scholars, and Coleridge himself, is the great earth- and mother-goddess ..., called Cybele in English.

This suggestion will soon seem less fantastic than it may appear at first sight.

As to the name: it corresponds more closely to Kubla-Cubla-Cublai than e.g. Volhard to Leonhard. How easily the two names can be mixed up was shown by a colleague of mine who had never heard of Kubla Khan and asked me if there was any connection with [Cybele], when I mentioned Coleridge's poem.

But what are the other features that Cybele and Cublai have in common? We shall disregard this question for the moment and instead consider first how the goddess Cybele sums up a number of the most important features of the disturbing, un-Kublalike second stanza and also the mysterious 'forests ancient as the hills.'

First of all we should stress the fact that Cybele was an extremely well-known and important goddess whose cult spread from Asia Minor to Greece and to Rome and all over the Roman Empire. She was familiar to Coleridge who refers to her in a notebook entry in 1805 in a context which is reminiscent of the landscape of the second stanza of 'Kubla Khan': 'the Rock-mountains die off into green Hills, ... O what a scene.' 'absolute rock, once or twice with a Tower like the Head of Cybele.'<sup>10</sup> Literary references to Cybele are frequent. Let us look at the details. 'Forests ancient as the hills.' Cybele was the goddess of the wild forests and the hills. ... Cybele was the goddess of wild, savage nature. Her original shrine was a cave in the mountains of Asia Minor. That her place was 'holy and enchanted' is a matter of course. 'Woman wailing for her demon lover': Cybele was probably the best-known of the goddesses who wailed for a demon lover. The legends attached to her lover Attis are many and we need not go into all the details connected with them.<sup>11</sup> The main fact is that Attis was mutilated and died and that Cybele wildly bewailed his death. The wildness of the sorrow expressed for his death at the festival of the Megalesia in Rome surpassed anything now imaginable. Her lover Attis was a vegetation god and his death signified the cyclical decrease in the forces of nature. In connection with this aspect Attis was also a moon-god, sometimes simply represented by the sickle of the moon. So we can understand that the wailing for the demon-lover takes place under a waning moon.

Cybele was identified not only with nature but with the Earth itself. She was Magna Mater, the Great Mother, giving birth to all there is on earth, to the gods as well as to vegetation. She is generally pictured as a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy. In her original shrine she was venerated as a piece of rock. So it is hardly surprising that, as earth giving birth to the fructifying forces of nature, she throws up pieces of rock that are compared to grain.

## VI

### THE SACRED RIVER ALPH: WITH WALLS AND TOWERS COMPASS'D ROUND

All these features fit Cybele exactly. Her connection with the sacred river Alph on the other hand is not so immediately clear. Lowes and Beer connect Alph with the sacred river Nile. We can stay nearer to the earth-goddess Cybele. First of all it seems quite fitting that the fructifying forces to which the mother-goddess representing the earth gives birth should appear as fountain and river, since these are the age-old facts and symbols connected with natural fruitfulness. We can also point out that Cybele was most commonly identified with the Greek mother-goddess Rhea. (In many classical dictionaries we are told to look for Cybele under Rhea.) Rhea in old pseudo-scholarly popular etymology was connected with ... to flow, and thus was The Flowing One. So Cybele as Rhea could be the river itself. That the river at the beginning of life should be called Alph (alpha) fits the context.

All these connections with the sacred river Alph may seem more or less plausible, but we shall have to find further links in order to make the connection convincing. At the same time I should like to take up the

question of the features that are common to Cublai and Cybele, by which the two could have been initially more easily confused with each other.

As we have seen, the word and image *forests* may be suggested by Cublai's 'beasts of chase and game' and it is also an aspect of Cybele as the goddess of the forests. This may be the connecting link where the shift from the one to the other side of this Janus-faced creature Cublai-Cybele takes place. But there are stronger similarities. Cybele was also the founder and protector of walled-in cities. Therefore she was most commonly pictured with a mural crown on her head, 'murali corona turrata, turrigera.' So her head is encircled with walls and towers, and as such she is mentioned by Coleridge in the passage from which I have quoted, and in the two most famous literary references to her that had appeared in English literature before Coleridge.

Cybele is mentioned by Milton—from whom Coleridge took a number of well-known details in 'Kubla Khan'—as 'the towered Cybele / Mother of a hundred Gods.'<sup>12</sup> We may now notice that the towers in 'Kubla Khan' do not figure in the passage from Purchas which Coleridge read before he started dreaming. Cublai has only walls built, but Cybele is provided with walls and towers or with a tower.

We pursue this line of development to the second famous literary reference to Cybele, which occurs in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*:

Like as the mother of the Gods ...  
Old Cybele, arayd with pompous pride,  
Wearing a Diademe, embattild wide  
With hundred turrets. (13)

In this as in other cases we should not remain content with locating isolated passages but should also regard the immediate context. And so we finally find the missing link, not one of Lowes's 'hooked atoms' but rather a tiny symbiotic cell with large possibilities of organic growth. In the passage from which I have quoted Spenser compares the God Thames to Cybele, for the Thames also wears a mural crown:

In which were many towres and castels set  
That it encompass round as with a golden fret.  
Like as the mother of the Gods, they say, ...  
Old Cybele. (14)

In Purchas we read: 'encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall', in Spenser: 'towres ... encompass round.' Coleridge's original MS version had 'With walls and towers compass'd round.' It is hard to decide whether this is nearer to Purchas's Cublai or to Spenser's Cybele. Cublai and Cybele have become fused in Coleridge's dreaming mind from the beginning, at the very source of his poem.

Now we can return to the problem of Cybele's connection with the sacred river Alph. Spenser's reference to Cybele occurs in the middle of the eleventh canto of the fourth book, which may be called the river-canto, for all the famous rivers of the world appear in order to be present at the marriage-feast of the Thames and the Medway. Cybele is compared with a river-god, the chief river of the canto, and among the many rivers mentioned in the canto there is also the river Alpheus which has been associated with the sacred river Alph by almost all the critics since Lowes. But the occurrence of its name in this context is no reason why Cybele should be connected with Alpheus rather than with any other of the many rivers mentioned by Spenser.

We have to go back to the quotation from Milton. There, Cybele, the Mother of the Gods, is mentioned in a dialogue called *Arcades*. The river Alpheus had its source in Arcadia. We read on for five lines after the name Cybele has occurred and find:

Of famous Arcady ye are, and sprung  
Of that renowned flood, so often sung,

Divine Alpheus, who by secret sluice  
Stole under seas to meet his Arethuse.

It may be a strange coincidence that in the two most famous literary references to Cybele Alpheus is not far away, but what is even more surprising is that the two are connected in historical fact. We turn to Pausanias' *Description of Greece* and read: 'Near the source of the Alpheius is a temple of the Mother of the Gods.'<sup>15</sup> So we can sum up: although Cublai is not connected with Alpheus and his palace does not stand near its source, Cybele's temple does, and since in Coleridge's dream Cublai and Cybele fuse, the sacred river Alpheus does in fact rise from the earth near his palace and thus we return to the lines which we disregarded at the beginning:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree  
Where Alph the sacred river ran.

To confirm our explanation we read on in Pausanias for another two lines and find another hooked atom as well as the rest of the general topography of the second stanza. 'The waters of the Eurotas mingle with the Alpheus, and the united streams flow on for some twenty stades. Then they fall into a chasm.' ... This provides Coleridge's *chasm* which occurs in the closest imaginable connection with Cybele and the sacred river Alpheus.

## VII

### CAVERNS MEASURELESS TO MAN

It is hardly necessary to go on in detail for the rest of the second stanza, for once the connection with Cybele is established a great many details will follow as a matter of course so that the many hooked atoms which Lowes found can coalesce round this dynamic centre. But perhaps we should say a few words about the lifeless and sunless ocean and the caverns measureless to man. Of course Cybele is associated with caverns, but why should she, the goddess of nature, vegetation and fertility, be associated with death? Perhaps she is not associated with it at all. Once the river flows it can assume an independent position. A river taking its origin at a source, flowing on for a certain distance and then joining the deep sea is an age-old symbol for human birth, life and death, and is a familiar picture in Coleridge's early poetry. He uses it in *A Wish* to describe his wished-for course of life. Here we also find the word *meandering* in search of which Lowes travelled so far.

Lo! through the dusky silence of the groves,  
Thro' vales irriguous, and thro' green retreats,  
With languid murmur creeps the placid stream  
And works its secret way,

Awhile meand'ring round its native fields  
It rolls the playful wave and winds its flight:  
Then downward flowing with awaken'd speed  
Embosoms in the Deep!

But perhaps the caves of death are associated with Cybele as well. Earlier critics have pointed out that the lifeless caverns may signify the fear of castration, for these caverns are opposed to the male erection of the dome of pleasure. Such a fear might be easily connected with Cybele, a jealous and savage goddess for whose sake not only Attis but her priests as well castrated themselves. She is the origin as well as the destroyer of fertility. But we should not insist too much on the theme of castration. Above all Cybele is the immense womb, the womb of the earth, the womb of birth as well as the womb of death.<sup>16</sup> And thus we take leave of the second stanza.

## VIII

### THE SHADOW OF THE DOME OF PLEASURE FLOATED MIDWAY ON THE WAVES

After the opposition of the pleasure-dome and the voices prophesying war which was already sketched in 'Religious Musings', and the stronger opposition between the world of Kubla Khan and the world of Cybele which intrudes in, and disrupts, the former opposition, Coleridge arrives at a dead end. And suddenly there is a jump into a different kind of world and atmosphere, in which darkness, tumult and savagery have disappeared although certain oppositions persist.

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!

Beer has a great many instructive things to say on this change, but some questions remain. What are the 'caves of ice' and where do they belong? Some critics think that *caves of ice* are identical with *measureless caverns*. Others are convinced that there is no connection at all between the caverns and the caves. Others again suggest that they are 'somehow' related. If we take the strictly antithetical structure of the stanza seriously *measureless caverns* and *caves of ice* have to be logically identical. In spite of this logic one hesitates. Of course there is no reason why the measureless caverns should not be icy or full of ice, but why should they be part of a miracle of rare device, for Coleridge says: a sunny pleasure-dome *with* caves of ice. But there are other changes. The tumult turns into mingled measure. And Kubla Khan has disappeared. Instead of 'Kubla heard' we have the statement of absolute perception: 'where was heard.'

In theory Coleridge was well acquainted with such a change, a reconciliation of opposites. It is already expressed in 'Religious Musings', but much more strikingly in 'Hymn before Sunrise' where he addresses the peak of Mont Blanc:

Around thee and above

Deep is the air and dark, substantial, black,  
An abode mass: methinks thou piercest it,  
As with a wedge! But when I look again,  
It is thine own calm home, thy crystal shrine,  
Thy habitation from eternity!(17)

First there is an inimical opposition of brightness and darkness; then at a second glance the dark inimical element turns suddenly bright, becomes a crystal shrine, an eternal home. But in 'Hymn before Sunrise' the change can be explained realistically, as an infinitesimal brightening of the sky before sunrise. In 'Kubla Khan' the original opposition is much more fundamental and cannot be resolved on a realistic level. But can we find any other explanation for this change?

First we should regard the initial two lines:

The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves.

The images of the dome and the river which were juxtaposed but separate, belonging to the different worlds of Kubla Khan and Cybele, are now fused in a single image. Only after this fusion does the tumult appear as measure, and dome and caves turn into a miracle of rare device. Wilson Knight calls this fusing image 'a Wordsworthian impression',<sup>18</sup> but the shadow on the water has a much deeper meaning for Coleridge than

that.

First of all we should think of 'The Ancient Mariner.' The ancient mariner is freed from his immobility, from pain and hardness of heart and is suddenly flooded with love when he looks at a shadow on the water, the water-snakes playing in the shadow of the ship on the moon-lit ocean. The shadow, the dematerialized form floating on the water reminds one of divine creation, the spirit moving upon the waters, upon the face of the deep. And then there was light. In Coleridge's terminology shadow by itself cannot mean the divine creative spirit, but he is acquainted with and uses 'overshadowing spirit.' What is more important in our context, there is another phrase which expresses a transforming and shaping power: *shadowy pleasure*. Coleridge uses this expression twice in his early poetry. Its use in the first version of the sonnet to Bowles is especially instructive:

shadowy Pleasure, with mysterious wings,  
Brooded the wavy and tumultuous mind,  
Like that great Spirit, who with plastic sweep  
Mov'd on the darkness of the formless Deep!

Here we have the opposition of pleasure and shaping spirit on the one hand and tumult, waves and dark and formless deep on the other, the opposition that dominates the first stanzas of 'Kubla Khan.' But when shadowy pleasure falls on the waves and tumult of the mind, the disturbing element disappears and is changed. So we can understand that the opposition in 'Kubla Khan' is resolved by the '*shadow of the dome of pleasure*' floating on the tumultuous waves through the dreamer's association with the solution in the earlier poem. What was formless becomes shaped, 'a miracle of rare device', although it does not lose its identity. 'Caves of ice' can still mean the immobility of death, but they are not dark and frightening any more, they have turned into 'a crystal shrine.' The change from *caverns* to *caves* is significant, for although identical in denotative value, the connotative value of the two words differs, *cave* having a more pleasant, protective meaning.<sup>19</sup>

## IX

### THE CYCLICAL MOVEMENT

At this point we can try to determine the exact relation of the source, the river and the lifeless ocean to each other. Beer contrasts the sacred river Nile, which according to ancient mythology returned to its source, with Coleridge's sacred river Alph, which—according to Beer—does not return to its source, and he bases some very important conclusions on this contrast. But as far as Coleridge's river is concerned this is sheer speculation without any foundation in fact. The fact is that Coleridge does not say anything definite about the exact relation of source, river and underground sea to each other. But we can make a few fairly safe guesses. We do not know how far the underground sea extends, but since it is called sea and ocean in measureless caverns we may assume that it extends very far beyond the five miles for which the river runs before it disappears. Thus this ocean extends below the mighty fountain. Does not then this mighty fountain rise from this ocean? The description of the fountain points in this direction, for the earth is pumping it up, forcing it up, flinging it up in pulsating movements from far below. The earth is pulsating to its very foundations for Coleridge does not speak of *the* earth, but of *this* earth, which can only mean the whole of the earth.

We can go further: the deep ocean is called sunless, lifeless. A few lines later the caverns are called 'caves of ice.' In this connection Lowes pointed to a small image of ice in the mountains of Cashmere which is said to have influenced Coleridge. Since this image is connected with the phases of the moon such an association is not unlikely. But would this be a sufficient reason to turn the caverns into caves of ice? Is it not conceivable and more plausible that, like the seas of the Antarctic in 'The Ancient Mariner', this subterranean sunless, lifeless ocean is a frozen ocean? But then, like the frozen ocean in 'The Ancient Mariner', it does not remain

completely frozen, there is a way out. An enormous fountain is thrown up, in it there are huge fragments. At first we do not know what kind of fragments, but in the first explanatory statement about them they are shot up like pieces of ice, 'like rebounding hail.' Then these lifeless icy fragments turn into fruitful chaffy grain, and only when we return to the more prosaic direct statement do they appear as dancing rocks. Then the river moves on and returns to the icy caverns. In this light we see a huge cyclical movement of life and death corresponding to the cyclical myth of Attis and Cybele.<sup>20</sup>

## X

### AN ABYSSINIAN MAID, SINGING OF MOUNT ABORA

The last stanza is the formulation of a paradox: the expression of the inexpressible, of the joy which is caused by the transformation of dissonance into harmony which takes place in the third stanza. On the whole I think that Beer's account of this part of the poem covers the ground very well. As regards the mysterious Abyssinian maid it would be tempting to accept Beer's argument that she should be identified with Isis for Isis is a sublime version of Cybele, a purer, more spiritual image of this earthly goddess.<sup>21</sup> But we hardly need Beer's very roundabout argument in favour of Isis in order to perceive a close connection between the Abyssinian maid and Mount Abora, which was Mount Amara in the MS version, and Cybele. As is well known Coleridge took the Abyssinian paradise Mount Amara from *Paradise Lost*: 'where Abassin kings their issue guard, / Mount Amara, though this by some supposed / True Paradise.' (IV, 280-282) Surprisingly enough, but—after what has gone before—logically enough, too, the woman that is in the closest possible touch with this Abyssinian mountain-paradise in *Paradise Lost* is nobody else but Cybele. The last name in the passage preceding our quotation, only three syllables away from the word Abassin (Abyssinian), is Rhea—not Rhea Silvia, but Rhea-Cybele. If this is an accident, it is a very strange accident indeed. A different explanation seems far more likely.

Whenever Coleridge read the fourth book of *Paradise Lost* the three names *Rhea—Abassin—Mount Amara* struck his eye simultaneously so that they were intimately connected by juxtaposition though not by logic. Here we can speak of hooked atomistic impressions. What then happened in the visionary dream must have been something like this: In the second stanza the world of chthonic Cybele, a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, was in savage though sacred tumult and in opposition to Kublai's world of idyllic oriental pleasure. In the third stanza the two opposites were miraculously reconciled. With Coleridge such a reconciliation of opposites is the fitting prelude to a vision of paradise. 'Kubla Khan' is not the only instance. In 'Hymn before Sunrise' where—as we have seen—a reconciliation of opposites takes place that comes very near to the one in 'Kubla Khan', the development is the same:

Yet, like some sweet beguiling melody,  
So sweet, we know not we are listening to it,  
Thou [Mont Blanc], the meanwhile, wast blending with my Thought,  
Yea, with my Life and Life's own secret joy:  
Till the dilating Soul, enrapt, transfused,  
Into the mighty vision passing—there  
As in her natural form, swelled vast to Heaven!

The translation of the visionary into heaven comes about through the agency of music. Mont Blanc, which had just before been addressed as 'dread and silent Mount' turns into something that is neither dread nor silent, into an incredibly sweet beguiling melody that transfuses the soul. Similarly the chaotic sounds of Cybele's world had turned into melodious measure in the third stanza. If the melody resulting from the vision of dread Mont Blanc reconciled with its opposite paved the sweet path to paradise how much more would this be the case with the wonderful melodious measure rising from the reconciliation of a far more powerful opposition that struck to the mythical, religious roots of mankind. While Coleridge's soul was thus being 'swelled vast to Heaven' by his vision of music and harmony in the third stanza his unconscious imagination must have



feverishly tried to find an image connecting Cybele and Paradise. And so, with lightning precision, his dreaming mind struck the reference to Cybele-Rhea in *Paradise Lost* in which she was stamped on his memory in the closest possible touch with a paradise: *Rhea—Abassin—Amara—True Paradise*. Thus we can understand how—in a visionary moment of a dream—the hidden but immensely powerful figure of Cybele from whose world melodious music arises can merge into an Abyssinian woman singing of Mount Amara.

But why should the woman turn into a maid? I suggest that this is part of the general transformation that takes place in the crucial third stanza. In 'Hymn before Sunrise' a dread and silent mount turns into a sweet beguiling melody, on the lower imaginative level of comparison appropriate to a less visionary poem. In 'Kubla Khan' the measureless caverns are transformed into caves that are part of a work of art, the tumult becomes musical measure, the woman a virgin. The later aspects are all purer and sweeter, more harmonious and spiritual than the appearances in the second stanza. They are the same and not the same, for the divine shadow of pleasure has touched them with its magic.

## XI

### MILK AND HONEY, HIS FLASHING EYES! HIS FLOATING HAIR!

There are further hints of Cybele lurking in the background at the very end of the poem. In discussing the finale of the poem both Elisabeth Schneider and John Beer stress the importance of the famous passage from Plato's *Ion* where milk and honey occur in connection with the poet who is in a divine frenzy. In our context it is remarkable that the passage begins with a reference to the priests of Cybele: 'For as the Priests of Cybele perform not their Dances, while they have the free Use of their Understandings; so these Melody-Poets pen those beautiful Songs of theirs, only when they are out of their sober Minds. But as soon as they proceed to give Voice and Motion to those Songs, adding to their Words the Harmony of Musick and the Measure of Dance, they are immediately transported; and possessed by some Divine Power, are like the Priestesses of Bacchus, who, full of the God, no longer draw Water, but Honey and Milk out of the Springs and Fountains.'<sup>22</sup>

It is fitting that the reference is not to Cybele herself but to her priests, for in the final stanza it is the poet singing of his miraculous experience who occupies the centre of the stage. The poet who was overwhelmed by Cybele turns into an ecstatic poet-priest who is most like the priests of Cybele.

'Flashing eyes' and 'floating hair' are part and parcel of the ecstatic behaviour of such a poet. Therefore we can hardly agree with Lowes in calling his accounting for these expressions 'highly probable.' Lowes locates their origin in a passage by Bruce, in a narrative of an Abyssinian king. '[The king] had desired me to ride before him, and shew him the horse I had got from Fasil. ... It happened that, crossing the deep bed of a brook, a plant of the kantuffa hung across it. I had upon my shoulders a white goatskin, of which it did not take hold; but the king, who was dressed in the habit of peace, *his long hair floating all around his face*, wrapt up in his mantle, or thin cotton cloak, *so that nothing but his eyes* could be seen, was paying more attention to the horse than to the branch of kantuffa beside him; it took first hold of his hair, and the fold of the cloak that covered his head ... in such a manner that ... no remedy remained but he must throw off the upper garment.' etc.<sup>23</sup> A verbal parallel does exist in this passage although the king's eyes are not flashing, but there is no trace of ecstasy, in fact the whole scene is utterly and absolutely different from that at the end of 'Kubla Khan.' There appears no interior link which would make the translation from Bruce to the poem meaningful. The parallel may be part of a secondary verbal agglomerating process, but the primary significant source of organic suggestive power eludes us in Lowes. Perhaps the priests of Cybele can lead us to the germ of this image of ecstasy for these priests were famous for their wildly floating hair. So Lucian says of the false prophet Alexander: 'He tossed his floating hair ... like a devotee of the Great Mother in the frenzy.'<sup>24</sup> In this passage Lucian does not say anything about the prophet's eyes, but in his initial description he speaks of the prophet's remarkable eyes as well as his long hair. He had 'eyes flashing with great fervour and divine

frenzy.’<sup>25</sup> So here, associated with the great Mother Cybele, a prophet appears with flashing eyes and floating hair. Moreover the whole immediate context is similar to that at the end of ‘Kubla Khan’, for these words follow the comparison with the devotee of Cybele and his floating hair: ‘Addressing the people from a high altar upon which he had climbed, he congratulated the city because it was at once to receive the god in visible presence. The assembly—for almost the whole city, including women, old men, and boys, had come running—marvelled, prayed and made obeisance.’ Then the prophet utters incomprehensible words to conjure up the god. This is closer to the general picture expressed in the last few lines of the poem than any passage quoted or referred to by Lowes, Elisabeth Schneider or John Beer. Here we have a great multitude in holy dread of the prophet, averting their eyes in obeisance, while the prophet, in sacred isolation from the surrounding crowd, through the power of his incantatory voice, is calling up a miraculous, divine presence which is going to be visible for all who hear him. So it is quite possible that the extremely powerful and suggestive myth of Cybele extends its ramifications to the very end of the poem.

## XII

### THE MUSICAL STRUCTURE

We have regarded some of the important features of the four stanzas as well as some verbal details. In conclusion I should like to add a few words on the overall structure of the poem. First of all I should like to stress the fact that the poem remains a fragment as far as the prophesied war-action centering on Kubla Khan is concerned. No amount of sophisticated argument will explain this away. But the far more important Kubla-Cybele contrast is definitely resolved and needs no continuation. What then is the exact structure of this completed poem?

One critic has suggested that ‘Kubla Khan’ is a kind of irregular Pindaric Ode, which does not mean much more than that the poem has a formless form.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes critics assume that the poem consists of two parts, the first three stanzas forming the first part, the last stanza the second part. Thus Wilson Knight calls ‘Kubla Khan’ a kind of extended sonnet, but later he comes to the hesitating conclusion that the poem may consist of three parts. Beer distinguishes four parts which correspond to the four stanzas: thesis, antithesis, static harmony and imaginatively anticipated fulfilment. This is very close to the structure of the poem but it is still too general and schematic. For one thing it does not consider the fact that the antithesis to the pleasure-dome is already introduced in the first five lines and that these first five lines form a minor metrical unit of their own.

We shall not find a traditional literary form that corresponds exactly to the structure of the poem. Its form is musical. Like no other poem in the English language that I know of it resembles a movement in sonata form. A movement in sonata form consists of four parts. The *exposition* states two themes, the first in the tonic, the second in the dominant. In the *development* these two themes are worked out. The recapitulation restates the themes as they occurred in the exposition, but now both are in the tonic. The movement is concluded by the *coda*, which did not originally figure in the sonata form, but which becomes of major importance in Coleridge's time, sometimes assuming an importance equal to that of the development. The coda finally resolves the last traces of the thematic conflict with great force and insistence.

In ‘Kubla Khan’ the *exposition* contains lines 1-5. This introductory part is clearly separated from what follows by its concluding three beat line. The first two lines state the principal theme or subject: *dome*. The last two lines state the secondary theme or subject: *caverns*. We can say that the first theme (*dome*) appears in the tonic (*pleasure*), a pleasant key. The second theme appears in a different, dark and unpleasant key (*sunless, measureless to man*). In between, in the third line, there is the river running from the pleasant surface to the sunless caverns. It corresponds to the modulating transition between the two themes in different keys.

In the *development*, from line 6 to line 30 at the end of the second stanza Coleridge works on the thematic material, which—as it should be according to the rules of composition—is related to the themes stated in the exposition, but is not identical with it. At the end he reaches the dark ‘dominant’ key and persists in it.

As in the sonata form the appearance of the *recapitulation* (which consists of the third stanza, lines 31-36) is the most important event. The thematic material of the exposition (*dome* and *caverns*) appears again, but the second theme (*caverns*) has become transformed into the joyful ‘tonic’ of the first theme and is joined with it in a miracle or rare device.

It is remarkable that in the exposition as well as in the development Coleridge truly keeps his second theme in the ‘dominant’, i.e. not in a completely independent key, but in a key that only functions in relation to the tonic, for the caverns are not ‘dark’ or ‘horrible’ or ‘deadly’ but *lifeless*, *sunless*, *measureless*. The last two expressions are explicitly related to the important tonic key-words ‘sunny’ and ‘measure’ by negation. Only in the recapitulation, when the second theme appears in the tonic as well does it assume a positive existence of its own: ‘Caves of ice.’

The *coda* (the last stanza) resolves the last remaining oppositions and conflicts in a large crescendo, and in the last word Paradise the poem concludes with a mighty, transcendent chord. Beer puts this very clearly: ‘As the poem draws to its close ... one is conscious of an inevitability in the final imagery, matched by an increasing weight of significance. It is like hearing a number of themes resolved in the conclusion of an intricate piece of music. Almost every strand which we have traced in the poem is reflected in the honey-dew and the milk of paradise.’<sup>27</sup>

I do not suggest that Coleridge tried to imitate a musical structure although he mentions a symphony within the poem. I should like to say rather that the structure of a movement in sonata-form and the structure of ‘Kubla Khan’ are based on the same fundamental dialectic principle, which in Coleridge’s poem is suggested by the accidental antithesis between Cublai and Cybele.

.....

These few hints are not meant to provide an ‘explanation’ of the poem, although this word has been used in the course of this essay. On the contrary I think that the power of the poem becomes more mysterious and incomprehensible the more we know about it. But about one thing we can be sure. The poem is not a product of fancy, although its materials are provided by memory. It is a product of imagination which ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create’ and which is ‘essentially *vital*.’

## Notes

1. Text as in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, Oxford 1912, vol. I, but divided into four stanzas as in the first edition of the poem (according to John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*) and in correspondence with the meaning of the poem.
2. John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, Boston and New York 1927; Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and ‘Kubla Khan’*, Chicago 1953; John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, London 1959.
3. Cp. Alice Snyder, *TLS*, 2 August 1934, p. 541, and E. H. W. Meyerstein, *TLS*, 12 January 1951, p. 21.
4. Quoted from *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. I, p. 296.
5. ‘Religious Musings’, lines 206/7.
6. ‘Religious Musings’, lines 224 f.
7. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, London 1957, vol. I, note 1281.8.30.
8. *Notebooks*, vol. I, note 424.3[frac12].32.

9. *Der Traum und seine Be-deutung*, Hamburg 1955.
10. *Notebooks*, vol. II, London 1962, note 2690.16.286.
11. Cp. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: Adonis, Attis, Osiris, and Roscher*, *Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, as well as Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, both of which provide very substantial and exact accounts of the main characteristics of Attis and Cybele.
12. In 'Arcades', lines 21/22.
13. Book 4, canto 11, stanza 28.
14. Book 4, canto 11, stanza 27/28.
15. VIII, *Arcadia*, XLIV, 3-4, translation from the Loeb edition. Regarding Coleridge's knowledge of Pausanias cp. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, p. 393. ('No one who has followed Coleridge's reading will doubt, I think, his acquaintance with Pausanias.') and *Notebooks*, vol. I, note 1170n.
16. In ancient etymology the name of the goddess Cybele was generally derived from —the name of mountains in Phrygia. was also used as an appellative meaning *caverns*. Did Coleridge know this and is this a further reason why caverns figure so prominently in his dream of Kubla?
17. Lines 7 ff.
18. *The Starlit Dome*, London 1959 (first ed. 1941).
19. Cp. Helmut Viebrock, 'Entwicklung und Wandlung des Topos 'Locus Amoenus' bei Keats', *Anglia*, vol. 74, 1956, p. 91.
20. Cp. the cycle of ice and river in *Hymn before Sunrise*, lines 39-48:

And you, ye five wild torrents fiercely glad!  
 Who called you forth from night and utter death,  
 From dark and icy caverns called you forth,  
 Down those precipitous, black, jagged rocks,  
 For ever shattered and the same for ever?  
 Who gave you your invulnerable life,  
 Your strength, your speed, your fury and your joy,  
 Unceasing thunder and eternal foam?  
 And who commanded (and the silence came)  
 Here let the billows stiffen, and have rest?

What follows in the poem is a prolonged shout of joy, caused by the contemplation of this transformed ice, which is no longer dark but luminous.

21. Cp. Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, London 1936, vol. II, p. 116.
22. Quoted from John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, p. 260.
23. Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*, p. 378.
24. Lucian, Loeb edition, vol. IV, p. 192.
25. Lucian, Loeb edition, vol. IV, p. 178.
26. E. H. W. Meyerstein, *TLS*, 30 October 1937, p. 803.
27. *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 264/65.

## Criticism: Irene H. Chayes (essay date 1966)

SOURCE: Chayes, Irene H. "'Kubla Khan' and the Creative Process." *Studies in Romanticism* 6, no. 1 (autumn 1966): 1-21.

[In the following essay, Chayes interprets "Kubla Khan" as one of Coleridge's most significant early statements on the process of poetic creation.]

In the evolution of "Kubla Khan" criticism over the past two generations,<sup>1</sup> the most noteworthy change has been the quiet downgrading of the famous prefatory note in prose which since 1816 has accompanied the

standard published text and has enormously influenced the way the poem has been understood. Since the discovery of the Crewe MS. and a much simpler, factual version of the note,<sup>2</sup> the tendency has been to dismiss the later version and the elaborate story it tells as one more example of Coleridge's "self-justifying memory" in the face of accumulating unfinished projects.<sup>3</sup> This may be as great a critical error, however, as the earlier, unquestioning acceptance of the 1816 note. It was by the expansion of his original comment and the addition of a title and a subtitle that Coleridge in effect made his chief revisions in "Kubla Khan" between the time of the Crewe MS. and eventual publication; changes in the verse text were negligible. And despite the defensive self-portrait that may emerge from them, his best-known notes and prefaces, along with other pseudo-editorial material, are most important for their relation to the poems themselves. Sometimes, like the argument, the motto from Bishop Burnet, and the marginal gloss in "The Ancient Mariner," such material seems to have been added in lieu of more fundamental revisions in the text, or as the author's own covert critical commentary.<sup>4</sup> The note to "Kubla Khan" admittedly offers some difficulty, since it is written in Coleridge's own discursive style and purports to tell how the poem itself came into being. Yet readers and critics alike often do tacitly accept Coleridge's note as a guide to the content of the poem, even when they reject it as a reliable autobiographical document. To assume that something is lost after stanza two, or that stanza three is a confession of failure, shows no less dependence on the prose account than to regard the whole poem as the product of an opium dream. Since the influence of the note evidently cannot be avoided, what is needed is a clarification of its actual relation to the poem, the relation of what is essentially a literary work in prose to one in verse.

Along with the revised note, or headnote—Coleridge also changed its position, so that it no longer followed the text but preceded it, like an epigraph or an argument—the published version of 1816 included a title and subtitle, "Kubla Khan, Or, A Vision in a Dream." If the precisely worded subtitle applied to the headnote, it would obviously refer to the poem which, according to the familiar account, appeared to the poet as a "vision" during his drug-induced sleep. But as a subtitle to the poem "Kubla Khan," "a vision in a dream" must similarly refer to some part of the subject matter of that work, not to the work itself; moreover, the prose note makes no mention of a "dream" distinct from either the poet's sleep or his vision.<sup>5</sup> At the outset, therefore, there is a suggestion of both parallel and difference between the headnote and the poem which tends to put both on the side of literary invention, equally opposed to the plain factuality of the original note in the Crewe MS.

In 1816, too, and again in the editions of 1828 and 1829, the headnote had a title of its own: "Of the Fragment of Kubla Khan." (Later this was combined with the subtitle to become "A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment.") Among the Romantics, "fragment" sometimes has almost a generic meaning, which does not exclude unity and completeness of the kind that has long been debated with respect to "Kubla Khan." But since in the Crewe note he also called it a "fragment," Coleridge perhaps did want to indicate that he regarded his poem as in some way unfinished. This need not at all mean that it is incoherent or inconclusive in effect. If there are lacunae in the poem as it stands, and as it exists in the Crewe MS. as well, they would be found not at the end of stanza three, which by almost any reading could not be improved on as a climax, but at the beginning of stanza one or between stanzas two and three. At both these points there are difficulties in orientation which are obscured for most present-day readers by their memories of the first part of the headnote and its curiously impressive, almost Gothic account of the lonely farmhouse, the "anodyne," the reading in *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, and the three hours of "profound sleep, at least of the external senses," during which the poet is said to have composed a poem of "from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort."

The sentences at the beginning of the headnote, that is, might almost have been written as an argument in prose, to tell the reader what he otherwise could not learn about the situation in the first two stanzas of the poem: that the unacknowledged point of view is that of a man asleep, probably dreaming; that the subject of the stanzas is a vision he passively receives during the dream, which might possibly be a poem itself, or might

supply the materials for one; and that the vision has originated in a particular passage from a particular work of literature, which is quoted in the headnote and can be identified in the first stanza. It is not uncommon for Coleridge to supply information of this kind from outside a poem, on the level of an epigraph or a prefatory comment, as well as more subtle commentary. The philosophical significance of the Ancient Mariner's experience is indicated in advance by the Latin quotation from Burnet; and the introductory note to "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison"<sup>6</sup> is less a gift to future biographers than a filling-in of the minor dramatic situation behind the meditation in the poem.

Insofar as the episode of Purchas and the poetry-inspiring drug serves as an improvised argument, the headnote to "Kubla Khan" functions as a part of the poem. Otherwise, the two come together only by way of a general structural parallel: a double movement in time, by which poetic composition of one kind occurs in the past but in some way is imperfect, and poetic composition of another kind is planned for the future but remains unachieved. At the same time, there are obvious differences. In the verse text, for instance, there is nothing to correspond to the transcription of the dream poem from memory, in which the poet is interrupted by the arrival of the "person on business from Porlock." And "the milk of Paradise" notwithstanding, the "anodyne" has no counterpart in the events of either the first two stanzas or the third. The greatest disparity is in tone and effect. From the high point at which it begins, a miraculous gift of art, the prose account descends through equally unpredictable loss, disappointment, and deferred effort, to borrowed reassurance in the quotation from Theocritus at its end, "But the to-morrow is yet to come." In contrast, "Kubla Khan" begins at much the same point as the headnote account and rises in its last stanza to one of the most powerful affirmations of triumphant creativity in all Romantic poetry.

If, therefore, the 1816 headnote to "Kubla Khan" is understood as largely a prose imitation of the poem it introduces, also serving in part as argument and gloss, the long-standing problems of unity, completeness, overall structure, and ultimate "meaning" are set in a new perspective. What has been said for many years about the process by which the poem supposedly was produced becomes a misplaced paraphrase of its content—and of only a portion of its content, at that. Recent critics—Beer, Watson, Purves, Suther—have begun to see a generalized poetic process at work in the poem. Actually, confirmed by the special relation the headnote bears to it, "Kubla Khan" becomes one of the group of Romantic poems—*The Prelude* and *The Fall of Hyperion* are the most prominent members—which are concerned quite specifically with the composition of poetry, both as experience and as mechanism, with an import that extends far beyond either literary biography or aesthetic theory. Coleridge's contribution is perhaps the earliest of all, and for its length it is the most complex in conception and the most fully realized. Moreover, the view of the creative process that is reflected in "Kubla Khan" is not peculiar to the early period of Coleridge's career. One aim of the reading that follows is frankly to try to rescue this poem from the last effects of the old belief in its uniqueness, which for too long has separated it from the mainstream of Coleridge's development, both literary and intellectual, and has helped to preserve an artificial division between his poetry and his thought. He himself was to say that his "poesy" was only an immature phase of his "philosophy," and I hope to show that, far from memorializing a glorious exception to its author's later critical principles, "Kubla Khan" actually anticipates them in the most concrete terms, even to the same emphases and the same value judgments he one day was to make as a philosopher of literature.

## II

In any critical consideration of "Kubla Khan," the chief stumbling-block is likely to be the exact relation of stanzas one and two to stanza three. Between these two unequal parts of the poem there is a disjunction, like that between the "before" and "after" sections of the headnote, and there may still be a temptation to emphasize either at the expense of the other. But the two parts are dependent on each other and on the order in which they appear, and in their different ways both are concerned with the creative process.

It has already been suggested here that the subject of the first two stanzas is the “vision in a dream” named in the subtitle, out of which, on analogy with the episode in the headnote, a poem may emerge; if that is so, what is the subject of the vision itself? Instead of the narrative the opening lines might lead one to expect what follows is largely description, in which the attention of most critics has been attracted to separate images and the meanings these may acquire in a variety of contexts outside the poem. Considered in this way, the imagery in stanza one, especially, may have implications of the most exalted kind. Kubla Khan in his *hortus clausus* might be an analogue of the godhead in eternity; the blossoming landscape of Xanadu might be Paradise. But whether he is potentially divine or demonic as an image, in the context of the poem Kubla Khan occupies a relatively limited place. He is named only twice, the second time under circumstances that make him anything but godlike in power, and his actual function, as will be seen, is to prepare the way for the greater rôle of the poet in stanza three. Xanadu, too, is only the first and least of three paradises which appear or are mentioned during the course of the poem in a pattern of rising importance. What is significant in the stanza is not its imagery as such, but the scene as a whole, which is best understood as an example of the *locus amoenus*, one of the *topoi*, or standard themes in traditional rhetoric, that entered European literature in the Middle Ages. The *locus amoenus* may merge into the conventional picture of paradise, earthly or heavenly, but it may also be limited to the simple poetical description of a garden; sometimes, like the gardens of Xanadu with the “stately pleasure-dome” in their midst, such a scene may include a building of some kind, a castle or a villa.<sup>7</sup>

The very different scene described in the first part of stanza two—the “deep romantic chasm” with its tree-covered slopes, the “mighty fountain” bursting out of the seething earth, and the “sacred river” flowing out from the fountain—belongs more recognizably to the poetry of Coleridge's own time, and it offers a better clue to what happens during the vision. What is found in this passage is a characteristic of Romantic nature description at its best: a distinctive principle of analogy which involves not the Renaissance system of rigidly separated, horizontal planes of correspondence but a vertical relationship of mirror like reflection and affinity between external nature and the human mind. The operation of the mind is expressed by action peculiar to nature, and the two sides of the analogy are interchangeable, so that an image or event in nature may actually enter the mind and take part in the intricate processes of perception and creation it represents.

One of the clearer examples of the principle of Romantic analogy at work, clearer because it is accompanied by the poet's own commentary, occurs in the Mt. Snowdon episode in *The Prelude*, Book XIV, where the moon shining over a sea of mist becomes “the emblem of a mind at feeds upon infinity” and at the same time provides the poet with the kind of experience that enables his own mind to “feed” upon “infinity.” There are other examples, in other poems by Wordsworth, in Shelley's *Alastor*, “Mont Blanc,” and “Ode to the West Wind,” and in Coleridge's own “Dejection: An Ode,” where the meditating, “blocked” poet, listening to the sounds of an Eolian harp during a storm, manipulates the mind-nature analogy so that the power of the assaulting wind becomes a substitute for his lost creative energy.<sup>8</sup> Among Coleridge's other poetry, as it happens, it is “Dejection” that is most nearly a companion to “Kubla Khan”; in many respects, like the prose headnote, the ode of 1802 appears to be an attempt to repeat the central events of the earlier poem in a different situation and with a different emphasis.

The first two stanzas of “Kubla Khan” offer description without commentary which nevertheless, in the full context of poem and headnote, consistently dramatizes a mental process and its effects within a mind. From time to time, critics have glancingly identified the two worlds that emerge from the opposing descriptions, the “paradisaical” and the “infernal,” with the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind; actually, such an identification is fundamental to the meaning of the first two stanzas. The total landscape in cross section, from Kubla Khan's pleasure ground through the chasm to the caverns and the underground sea, is at once the content of the vision in a dream and a pictorial diagram of the operation of the dreamer's mind during the whole experience. More precisely, the landscape with its descending levels would be the mind as structure, and the processes within it, summed up in the flowing of the river, “meandering with a mazy motion,”<sup>9</sup> the mind as activity. While the one sustains the vision, the other carries it forward and in effect creates it. At the same time, both the landscape and the river cross the boundary of the analogy and themselves become part of

the dreamvision in its totality, as in *The Prelude* the emblematic breaking of the moon through the clouds is what the poet's revelation shows him. Since the analogical process in "Kubla Khan" becomes a creative process, the merging of "tenor" and "vehicle"<sup>10</sup> has a functional rightness here that it lacks in some other Romantic poems.

The vision in a dream, concerned with the events in the dreamer's mind during its own evolution, takes its start from a *donnée*, a literary source, as the headnote emphasizes. By quoting the sentences from Purchas in advance of the poem, Coleridge was in effect inviting the reader to watch for the changes that would be made in them when the mind began its work. Four lines only, 1-2 ("In Xanadu did Kubla Khan stately pleasure-dome decree") and 6-7 ("So twice five miles of fertile ground the walls and towers were girdled round") echo the passage quoted—and they are closer in some respects to the actual text of *Purchas His Pilgrimage* than to Coleridge's recollection of it.<sup>11</sup> Between the two pairs of echoed lines there occurs the first reference to the native topography of the mind, and the first original contribution by the mind to the vision that is beginning to take shape: "Where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man under a sunless sea." Kubla Khan, the pleasure-dome, the river, the caverns, the underground sea: five of the six images that are to take part in the events of the next stanza are introduced briefly in the first five lines. Properly, these lines are neither narrative nor descriptive but present a relationship; in that relationship, at first, the mind is subordinate to its borrowed content. The remainder of the stanza, lines 8-11, is made up of minor descriptive details, all visual, which are appropriate to the suggested setting.

With the exception of lines 3-5, then, stanza one is a paraphrase and elaboration of the passage quoted from Purchas; its conventional and archetypal qualities, admired as they have been, make it derivative also. As the opening scene in a creative vision, it stands on a relatively low level, in fact. If it were to be attributed to one of the three faculties involved in Coleridge's own conception of the creative process, it would be the work of the arranging and ornamenting fancy, which in *Biographia Literaria* is defined as "a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space," receiving "equally with the ordinary memory ... all its materials ready made from the law of association."<sup>12</sup> Even the obvious beauties of the scene in Xanadu are a sign of its limitation. It might be just such a vision, and just such poetry, that the speaker in "Dejection" is referring to when he recalls the false "dreams of happiness" once made for him by Fancy: "For hope grew round me, like the twining vine, and fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine" (ll. 78-81). If, too, any portion of "Kubla Khan" was actually composed during the "reverie" (*not* sleep) acknowledged in the note to the Crewe MS., or was in Coleridge's mind when he wrote his later prose myth of composition by vision, it might well have been this stanza.

Stanzas one and two are joined by a continuity of landscape; but in lines 12-24 the second world of "savage" nature is already a metaphor for the mind of the dreamer, which now becomes a major part of the vision. With the descent into the "deep romantic chasm," the vision itself enters a new phase, in which it is no longer dependent for its materials on memories of Purchas. The style in this passage is markedly unlike that in the rest of the poem, being more personal and at the same time more conventionally literary, interspersed with exclamations and similes (the only use of that figure of speech in all three stanzas) and hinting of a half-awakened and responsive sensibility somewhere on the borders of the dream.<sup>13</sup> The crucial event in the stanza is the rising of the fountain, upon which depends all that happens thereafter. Like the storm-wind in "Dejection," the "mighty fountain" here represents creativity,<sup>14</sup> conceived as a powerful and impersonal, even nonhuman force, in which the poet can only participate and which stirs him to awe by its manifestations, even when they are in his own mind. Also relevant are two other fountain-images in poems by Coleridge: the "spring of love" that gushes from the Ancient Mariner's heart when he is moved by the beauty of the water-snakes; and the inner source of "joy" in "Dejection," where beauty in nature depends on the state of mind of the observer, "the passion and the life, whose fountains are within." It is not difficult to find in either of these instances an illustration of one of the defining characteristics of Coleridge's supreme creative faculty, the primary imagination—that it is "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception."<sup>15</sup> The primary imagination is also called "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I



AM”; what form the “eternal act of creation” might take can be seen in “Religious Musings” and the closing address to “Contemplant Spirits! ye that hover o’er th untired gaze the immeasurable fount ullient with creative Deity” (ll. 402-404).

The fountain in “Kubla Khan” carries no convenient metaphorical tag, but by its action and effects as well as by its imagery it would fulfill both conditions of the definition. In the “finite mind” of the dreamer, where a new world in miniature is soon to be created out of the materials of the vision itself, it is a ready analogue of the “immeasurable fount” of divinity; for good reason, the place in which it rises is called “holy and enchanted” and the river that falls from it is “sacred.” And since the ultimate product of the creative process that is going on in the dreamvision is to be a visual image, hailed by an exclamation, the “living power” of the fountain would plausibly be the “prime agent” in the activity of perception that is going on, at least subliminally, during the dream. For although the dreamer’s presence can only be inferred, the tone of wonder and the vividness of the description make the scene in the chasm a rudimentary aesthetic revelation which prepares the way for the closer relation between perception and creation that is to come in stanza three.

If the fountain corresponds to the imagination in its primary aspect, the river “flung up” by it corresponds to the secondary imagination, so called, which is “identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, ... differing only in *degree*, and in the mode of its operation”; the secondary imagination, too, is “essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.”<sup>16</sup> Both statements might be made of the calmer and widely ranging river as it carries the creative force of the fountain to the fixed landmarks of both worlds of the vision:<sup>17</sup>

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.

(ll. 25-28)

In these lines, the river follows the same course as in lines 3-5, on what must be understood as a second circuit. Since the fountain erupts in pulses, being “momently” forced out of the seething earth (l. 19), and the river “momently” is flung up from the fountain (l. 24), there is an implication of cycles of creative energy, swelling and subsiding, like the spells of compulsive speech that seize the Ancient Mariner during his wanderings. Both circuits of the river conclude with a descent and the presumed exhaustion of the power that sent it in its way; in each instance, the creative effects of the river’s passage appear in the vision only after the river itself has vanished. The elaboration of the *locus amoenus* in Xanadu, under the dominant faculty of the fancy, is the immediate effect of the briefly acknowledged first circuit; the indirect effect is a penetration to the point of emergence of the primary imagination itself. With the second circuit, there is an apparent return to the beginning of the poem, but the main clause, and it is not preceded but followed by a reference again to Kubla Khan, which leads the vision into its final phase and to an end far from its beginning.

### III

A number of critics<sup>18</sup> have been prepared to find a Coleridgean reconciliation of opposites in “Kubla Khan,” and this is, in fact, one of the several patterns that can be traced in progressive stages through the entire poem. Since Coleridge considered the imagination to be the “reconciling and mediatory power,”<sup>19</sup> it is appropriate that the fountain and the river should be associated with the processes of reconciliation and mediation in stanza two. The fountain rises in the chasm, which, since it “slants” downward from the upper world to the lower, in effect mediates between them—a midway region of dynamic creativity that shades off in either direction toward a static extreme. The task of reconciliation proper, however, belongs to the river, which travels from its central source to both opposing worlds, and the final reconciliation of those worlds is the form

under which the effect of its second circuit appears. In stanza one, the two ultimate extremes are represented by the two chief images of stasis, Purchas' Kubla Khan himself, secluded in his pleasure park by "girdling" walls and towers, as though in a fortress, and the "sunless sea," far below in the deepest reservoirs of the dreamer's unconscious mind. The first passage of the river establishes the opposition between the extremes; it is immediately after the second that they begin to approach each other. The commotion of the river's descent into the sea of the unconscious, now called "a lifeless ocean," crosses the distance of the whole dream landscape to reach the hearing of "Kubla" and carries with it, by means of an element totally new to the vision, a warning of greater disturbance to come: "And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far cestral voices prophesying war!"

How should these "voices" be understood? Since they are "heard from far"—they are, incidentally, the first unmistakable sound image in the poem, following the earlier imagery of sight and movement—they would seem to have their origin outside the vision, although not necessarily outside the dreamer's mind. As early as 1796 Coleridge was commenting on the incorporation of new perceptions into the substance of passive psychological states, such as reverie or the visions of delirium;<sup>20</sup> the intrusive sensations might come from without or within. Coming from within, similarly threatening forces—a "fiendish crowd shapes and thoughts"—torture the dreamer in "The Pains of Sleep," the third poem in the "Kubla Khan" volume, which Coleridge mentions in his headnote as "a fragment ... describing with equal fidelity the dream of pain and disease." In the sense that they, like the "fiendish" shapes and thoughts, have been stored up in the dreamer's unconscious from past experiences and past states of mind, from all that has sunk into the "lifeless ocean" ("All thoughts are in themselves imperishable," Coleridge was to say),<sup>21</sup> the intrusive voices are properly called "ancestral." The "war" they prophesy is a threat of conflict, invasion, and destruction to both the vision that has been unfolding and the dream that frames it. As the most vulnerable image in the vision, because among the borrowed elements he is the least capable of being assimilated to the sleeping mind that contains them, Kubla Khan is the most likely one to receive the threat; after his brief return, he is not referred to again.

Yet, although the whole vision in a dream is threatened by the awakening of destructive forces in the unconscious, the process of reconciliation of opposites moves on to its conclusion. According to Coleridge's definition, the characteristic action of the secondary imagination is that it "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate." It is just such action that occurs in the closing lines of stanza two. In the afterglow of the river's reconciling circuit, the opposing halves of the vision are dissolved into their essential elements, which then are diffused into the atmosphere of the fading dream and finally recreated as a new, synthetic image in which both originals, the mind and its content, are indissolubly united.

In lines 31-36, after the sacred river and Kubla Khan both have been eliminated, the remaining images from both worlds and from the chasm between them are relocated and recombined in a swift succession of new and unexpected pairings, each pair of images marking an increasingly closer conjunction of opposites. "The shadow of the dome of pleasure oated midway on the waves." Here both images have lost their concreteness, the dome having become hardly more than a reflection and the ocean having been reduced to generalized "waves"; in some unspecified central region, corresponding to the earlier chasm, the two are loosely juxtaposed, shadow floating *on* waves. Next in order, but apparently at the same midpoint in space, the violent beginning and ending of the river's circuit—the "turmoil" amid which the fountain rises (l. 17) and the "tumult" of the final descent (l. 28), in both of which sound might be involved as well as movement—are combined and regularized in a kind of music: "Where was heard the mingled measure om the fountain and the caves." Finally, in the last remaining combination, one image from the first pair and one from the second unite even more intimately in a third, crowning image of reconciliation: "It was a miracle of rare device sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice." The pleasure-dome from Purchas, representing the whole imported edifice of memory, and the caves of the sleeper's own mind, indigenous and primordial, "measureless" as the fount of creative Deity is "immeasurable": the two images reconciled here have been radically displaced and transformed into complements as well as opposites before being brought together. The preposition that rather awkwardly joins them only emphasizes that each has lost its original, independent identity and now exists

only in union with the other.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV

Despite its remarkable congruence with the concepts of imagination and fancy, there is one respect, and it is an important one, in which the process that can be traced in the first two stanzas of “Kubla Khan” is not compatible with Coleridge's later discussions of the mind and its mechanisms. Repeatedly in these discussions, on all levels of mental activity, the key faculties are will and consciousness. In ordinary acts of thinking, it is the will whose function is “to control, determine, and modify the phantasmal chaos of association,” and the consciousness that makes the necessary distinctions among the conditions of association and recollection.<sup>23</sup> On the creative level, the secondary imagination is found “coexisting with the conscious will,” and the fancy is “blended with, and modified by, that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice.”<sup>24</sup> Conversely, in his discussions of dreams and pathological mental states, Coleridge almost always makes a point of the absence of the conscious and controlling powers. In dreams, “images and thoughts possess a power in, and of themselves,” independent of the judgment or understanding;<sup>25</sup> if the “check” of the senses and the reason were withdrawn, fancy would become “delirium” and imagination, “mania”;<sup>26</sup> “absolute delirium,” again, would be the result if there were no “interference” by will, reason, and judgment in the ordering of outward impressions.<sup>27</sup> In *Biographia Literaria*, it is the absence of the conscious controlling powers that is the chief defect of Hartleyan associationism in Coleridge's eyes;<sup>28</sup> and it is the critique of Hartley, in turn, that prepares the way for the definitions of fancy and imagination.

If “Kubla Khan” consisted only of its first two stanzas, the absence of a ruling, conscious will during the processes they dramatize might seem to mean that in writing it, Coleridge the poet of 1797 was opposing Coleridge the theoretical critic of 1817. The vision in a dream, if not the poem “Kubla Khan” itself, then would indeed be “the wonderful proof that spontaneous composition can be art, even that the source of art is the imagination freed from the censor of conscious control.”<sup>29</sup> But early in stanza two, as has been seen, there are stirrings of subliminal consciousness on the part of the dreamer as he becomes aware of the birth of the imagination in his mind; the careful and detailed similes in lines 14-24 would suggest also that the mechanical operation of the “law of association” is being modified by some form of the voluntary “comparative power,” which is suspended during ordinary sleep.<sup>30</sup> Further, the intrusion by the “ancestral voices” implies that the outer dream comes to an end at just the moment when the imagination comes into full command of the vision. Even if they alone constituted the poem, stanzas one and two would not show the “uncensored” creative powers in unmitigated triumph. What they seem to express instead is the unavoidable paradox of spontaneous composition, during which the mind cannot remain passive, submitting to an endless procession of images mechanically linked by association, as of the gardens and forests of Xanadu repeated without development. Yet it becomes active, and actively creative, descending into the chasm to the fountainhead of the imagination, only at the risk of waking the ancient forces of “war” in the unconscious.

There is a third stanza, however, and in it, will and consciousness do assume the importance they are given in Coleridge's later prose discussions. The relation of this stanza to the two preceding it lies precisely in the difference between unconscious mental activity and conscious; between the spontaneity and autonomy of the creative faculties during sleep or reverie, and the voluntary control that governs them under the normal conditions of waking composition.

In the prose headnote, it would be to the account of the presumed opium vision and the interrupted task of poetic transcription that stanzas one and two generally correspond. Stanza three, similarly, would correspond to the conclusion: “Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him.” This correspondence, too, is only general, by way of an expression of conscious purpose: “with music loud and long, would build that dome in air, at sunny dome! those caves of ice!” There is now no need to infer the presence of a point of view; the speaker is in the foreground, using the first person and talking in a definite voice. The context makes clear that

it is a poem he is talking about, and the phrasing echoes the opening lines of stanza one with a significant change of verb as well as subject. Whereas Kubla Khan could only “decree” the original pleasure-dome, command that it be constructed by someone else, the speaker here would more directly “build” his poetic counterpart of it, expressing his will as conscious action of his own.<sup>31</sup> He is seeking not merely to emulate Purchas' Oriental emperor but to surpass him, and not merely to recapture a spontaneous vision but to bring it into existence according to a preconceived plan. This would seem to be the true relevance of the quotation from Purchas and the recurring image of the pleasure-dome, for according to legend, Kubla Khan's palace originated in a dream;<sup>32</sup> in the record of a conversation in 1811, Coleridge is reported to have spoken of “lines” he had written “upon the building of a Dream-palace by Kubla Khan.”<sup>33</sup> Just as Kubla Khan's dream was given reality by the building of the pleasure-dome, so the vision of Kubla Khan's pleasure-dome is to be given reality by the composition of a poem.

The last stanza, thus, is concerned with a new creative process, governed by a purposive will, which would replace and correct the earlier process, autonomous and unconscious, or partially conscious, that was at work in the dreamvision. Correction is the function of stanza three even in a formal sense, for virtually every element in it is a counterpart on a higher level of at least one from stanzas one and two. The achievement that is foreseen by the poet is not lessened by the use of the conditional, “Could I ..., I would. ...” In contrast to the headnote and its ruefully wistful tone, and in spite of the strong influence this has had on the way the stanza has been read, these lines do *not* express a longing for what has been proven beyond the speaker's capacity (“if only I could”). At the very least, they offer a statement of cause and effect, explaining how an alternative process, a better one, could be put into operation: “If I could do thus and so (as part of a complex procedure), such and such would be the result.” Later, like stanza seven of “Dejection,” which perhaps was modelled on it, the conditional statement becomes a prophecy of poetic triumph, as far from the apology in which the headnote trails off as it is possible to imagine.

The alternative creative process, like the one it is replacing, begins with a vision—for the first and only time in the text (l. 38), the word “vision” is used—which also has been seen in the past, another object of memory. The muse like “damsel with a dulcimer,” the “Abyssinian maid,” is the first correction image in the stanza, recalling and as it were civilizing the only other female figure in the poem, the “woman wailing for her demon-lover” from the simile in stanza two (ll. 15-16). “Mt. Abora,” the subject of the damsel's song, in the Crewe MS. was originally “Mt. Amara,” which, as a number of scholars have noted, is named in *Paradise Lost* (IV, 280-284) as a retreat “where Abassin Kings thir issue Guard”; it is also one of the lesser paradises of pagan legend which, says Milton, cannot be compared to Eden. Since Mt. Amara was “by som suppos'd ue Paradise,” the allusion in line 41, brief and disguised as it is, refers to a second *locus amoenus*, already on a higher level than the pleasure ground of Xanadu. The literary allusion, too, suggests the work of the fancy, again functioning at the lowest stage of the creative process, although more briefly than in the dreamvision.

It was the damsel herself that the poet originally “saw”; but what he must “revive” in himself is only a part of the vision—“her symphony and song.” Even this is to be cultivated not for its own sake but for its emotional effect:<sup>34</sup> “To such a deep delight 'twould win me, at with music,” etc. “Delight” is the word which in “Dejection” is associated with the story of the lost child: “A tale of less affright, d tempered with delight.” It was also a quasi-technical term in eighteenth-century aesthetics,<sup>35</sup> and Coleridge uses it in a significant sentence in *Biographia Literaria* when he says that “the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of imagination.”<sup>36</sup> Although both visual and auditory effects are present in both forms of the creative process, music would dominate the second, as visual imagery dominated the first. (Images, says Coleridge, “do not of themselves characterize the poet.”)<sup>37</sup> In the corrected process, the remembered music would move the poet to a state of “delight” and lead to new music, thence to a new vision. “With music loud and long”—that is, by means of the harmonious sounds of his verse, a more fully developed and better sustained music than the “mingled measure” from fountain and caves that preceded the emergence of the “miracle of rare device” in stanza two—the poet would “build that dome in air! at sunny dome! those caves of ice!” The images that gather and merge as he speaks, the “stately pleasure-dome” and the “sunny

pleasure-dome with caves of ice,” are from the beginning of stanza one and the conclusion of stanza two, respectively, so that the new poetic vision would embrace the whole of the original dreamvision. In other words, the content of the planned poem would be substantially the same as the events in the first two stanzas of “Kubla Khan.”

This is a point whose significance has not been sufficiently appreciated. It establishes, first of all, as part of Coleridge's evident intention the separation of the first two stanzas from the third, and their subordination to it. Moreover, it makes clear that the early vision in a dream is not in itself a poem; the vision will *become* a poem when the correct procedure of creation is followed. And, in the larger terms of “Kubla Khan” itself, the relatively late allusion to the dreamvision brings together the inner, autonomous, and largely automatic creative process from the second stanza, and the consciously willed and controlled process that is being seen from the outside and reported, or predicted, in the poet's own words. The inner process, in improved and orderly form, would be going on behind the scenes, in the poet's mind, after being set in motion by the elaborate preparatory ritual from without. Since the eventual creation of the new vision of dome and caves depends on the preliminary experience of music and “delight,” an aesthetic experience based on sensory perception at one remove, the primary imagination would have its place in the conscious process also. The return of the dome-and-caves image similarly implies action again by the secondary imagination, which would occur even less obtrusively than in stanza two but in a more effective and more legitimate way (normally, the secondary imagination coexists with the conscious will), and in a medium more durable than a dream.

## V

The most striking difference between the two processes is found in what happens in each to the “miracle of rare device” once it has come into existence. In stanza two, it is seen only by the dreamer and presumably is lost, except to his memory, when he wakes. In stanza three, it has a better chance of survival. Without a break in his prescriptive prophecy, the poet reveals in line 48 that the poetic vision he would “build” would be seen not by him but by an audience, as the direct effect of the music of his verse: “And all who heard should see them there.” The presence of an audience is rarely acknowledged in Romantic poetry, even the most hortatory; “Kubla Khan” is the only Romantic poem in which the audience has a function in the creative process itself, carrying on the progression from perception to creation to perception once more. Even this is not the last step, for the listeners would move from hearing and seeing to making an utterance of their own, which occupies the remainder of the stanza. With their imagined, and quoted, speech there is an abrupt shift in the point of view, and the “I” of the preceding lines is suddenly seen as he would appear to his awestricken observers:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

(ll. 49-54)

Greater than either the will-less and ego-less dreamer or the deliberate seeker after inspiration, the poet here, at the conclusion of the creative process, is a human embodiment of the power which in stanza two, near the beginning of the dreamvision, erupts in uncontrolled violence as the “mighty fountain.” (A complementary image is, again, the storm-wind of “Dejection,” which at one point is addressed as “Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold,” and is progressively humanized by the kinds of poetry attributed to it.) As has been recognized, the figure the poet has become by the end of the third stanza is both traditional and Romantic, the *vates* of Plato and Longinus merging with the Bard of Gray and Blake. It is also a figure from Coleridge's own poetry

earlier in the 1790s—the inspired visionary who chants his prophecies in “Religious Musings,” “The Destiny of Nations,” “Ode to the Departing Year,” and “France: An Ode.” In “Religious Musings,” the climax is an imagined vision of “the Throne of the redeeming God” which “Wraps in one blaze earth, heaven, and deepest hell” (ll. 398-401). In “Kubla Khan,” the climactic, and concluding, word is “Paradise,” the one specific use of it in all fifty-four lines, which the emergence of the poet himself finally makes possible. This is the true Paradise, toward which both Xanadu and Milton’s Mt. Amara-Abora have been only steps in approach. But in the full context of the poem it is more than a renewed Eden, an Oriental heaven of sensuous pleasures (although in the poet’s view his hearers would think of “honey-dew” and “the milk of Paradise”), or the different, Dantesque heaven of the mystic. It is the Paradise to which the *vates*, seer, or bard is snatched up in his holy ecstasy, his *furor poeticus*, which is to say that it is inseparable from his ecstasy itself—a state of supremely heightened consciousness that is the fullest expression of poetic creativity.

From memory to dream to poem to poet: the culminating vision in “Kubla Khan,” the final product of the corrected creative process, thus is to be a vision of the poet himself, which his poetry will enable his audience to behold directly. On a higher level than the image of interpenetrating dome and caves to which it corresponds, this vision represents a reconciliation of opposites, from the first two stanzas and the third, that brings the whole poem to resolution: the “mighty fountain” and Kubla Khan’s successor; imagination and will; creation and perception; private experience and communicated; dream and art. Similarly, in *Biographia Literaria* the well-known catalogue of the “opposite or discordant qualities” that are reconciled in poetry is introduced in a definition of the poet, not of poetry itself.<sup>38</sup> Although the imagination is the reconciling power, it is only when the imagination is embodied in the poet that it performs its poetic function. He is its vehicle, and his unifying and controlling presence is the necessary condition of its efficient operation.

In the last step of all, as he is made visible by his own prophecy, the poet is received in terror and reverence by his imagined audience, for whom the vision of his power is as much a religious experience (“Close your eyes with holy dread”) as an experience of art. When the creative process has been repeated, corrected, and transcended, the pattern of progressively heightened visions will come to an end with a double extinction of vision in the organs of sight itself—the “flashing eyes” of the bard, whose gaze is turned inward, absorbed in his own activity, and the piously closed eyes of his audience. The distance between them is maintained; the spectators accept their exclusion and, like the Wedding-Guest listening to the Ancient Mariner, transform the bard’s experience into knowledge of their own: “For he on honey-dew hath fed.” “Paradise” is their inference, and through them, his also. Without relinquishing control of the whole, complex process he has set in motion, the subject becomes an object, even to himself, and the way is opened for Coleridge’s generalizations about poets and poetry twenty years in the future.

## Notes

1. Recent studies include J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London, 1959), Chs. VII-IX; George Watson, “The Meaning of ‘Kubla Khan,’” *A Review of English Literature*, II (1961), 21-29; A. C. Purves, “Formal Structure in ‘Kubla Khan,’” *Studies in Romanticism*, I (1962), 187-191; W. W. Beyer, *The Enchanted Forest* (Oxford, 1963), Ch. IV; E. E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle, Wash., 1963), pp. 84-91; Richard Gerber, “Keys to ‘Kubla Khan,’” *English Studies*, XLIV (1963), 321-341; M. F. Schulz, *The Poetic Voices of Coleridge* (Detroit, 1963), pp. 114-124; Kathleen Raine, “Traditional Symbolism in ‘Kubla Khan,’” *Sewanee Review*, XXII; (1964), 626-642; M. E. Suther, *Visions of Xanadu* (New York, 1965). See also below.
2. Published in letters to *The Times Literary Supplement* by A. D. Snyder, August 2, 1934, p. 541, and E. H. W. Meyerstein, January 12, 1951, p. 21.
3. See Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago, 1953), p. 26.
4. See my article, “A Coleridgean Reading of ‘The Ancient Mariner,’” *Studies in Romanticism*, IV (Winter 1965), 83-85.

5. In the Preface to "Christabel," published in the same volume, "vision" is already a metaphor for completeness of artistic intention: "In my first conception of the tale, I had the whole present to my mind, with the wholeness, no less than the liveliness of a vision." *Christabel; Kubla Khan, A Vision; The Pains of Sleep* (London, 1816), p. V.
6. *The Annual Anthology*, ed. Robert Southey (Bristol, 1799-1800), II, 140.
7. See E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W. R. Trask, Bollingen Series XXXVI (New York, 1953), pp. 195-200.
8. On "Dejection," see my "Rhetoric as Drama: An Approach to the Romantic Ode," *PMLA*, LXXIX (1964), 69-71.
9. Similar movements of advance and retreat were later used by Coleridge to represent various activities of the mind. See *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (London, 1907), I, 86 (a water-insect moving upstream), 225 ("zig-zag"); II, 11 (the motion of a serpent).
10. The terminology is from W. K. Wimsatt, "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky., 1954), pp. 114-115. Although it is restricted to certain metaphorical relations, Wimsatt's essay treats one aspect of what here is called Romantic analogy.
11. See 3d ed. (London, 1617), p. 472. On Coleridge's use of Purchas, see J. L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Boston and New York, 1927), pp. 360-363; cf. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bollingen Series L (New York, 1957-), I, 1281 and n., 1840 n.
12. Shawcross, I, 202. Cf., in different terms, Watson (p. 27). With an understanding of fancy based on Coleridge's criticism of Wordsworth, and without an actual examination of the style of the poem, this writer dismisses the whole first thirty-six lines of "Kubla Khan" as "factual, detailed, matter-of-fact" and hence "unpoetical" (p. 26).
13. "Even in the most tranquil dreams, one is much less a spectator [than in reveries or daydreams]. One seems always about to do, [to be] suffering, or thinking, or talking." *Anima Poetae*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (Boston and New York, 1895), p. 71. Concerning the change in style, see a notebook entry of 1805: "A man's Imagination fitfully awaking & sleeping—the odd metaphors & no metaphors of modern poetry guage in its first state without the *inventive* passion." *Notebooks*, II, 2723. In these terms, the birth of the "inventive passion" at the eruption of the fountain would account for the change in style again at the end of stanza two; see n. 22 below.
14. Cf. the Preface to "Christabel" and the reproach to critics "who have no notion that there are such things as fountains in the world, small as well as great; and who would therefore charitably derive every rill they behold flowing, from a perforation made in some other man's tank." *Christabel*, etc., p. vi.
15. Shawcross, I, 202.
16. Shawcross, I, 202.
17. It should be emphasized that in this study it is *not* being assumed that in 1797 (if the date given in the Crewe MS. note is accepted) Coleridge had already formulated the concepts of primary and secondary imagination in the terms that were to appear in *Biographia Literaria*. What is being suggested is that when he made his conceptual formulations for *Biographia Literaria*, he drew on the existing examples of his own best poetic practice as well as on the principles and the language of metaphysics and theology. In "The Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan," in particular—poems whose publication in 1816 and 1817 made them virtual products of the *Biographia* period—he would have found not only effects that could be attributed to the two aspects of the imagination but also imagery and action, such as the vision of the water-snakes or the eruption of the fountain and the circuit of the sacred river, which could be taken as concrete dramatizations of their "modes of operation."
18. See, e.g., Charles Moorman, "The Imagery of 'Kubla Khan,'" *Notes and Queries*, CCIV (1959), 321-324; D. B. Schneider, "The Structure of 'Kubla Khan,'" *American Notes and Queries*, I (1963), 68-70.
19. *The Statesman's Manual*, in *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York, 1871-1878), I, 436.

20. Letter to Thomas Poole, November 15, 1796, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford, 1956-), I, 257.
21. Shawcross, I, 79.
22. See also the emblem chosen for "Dejection," the "new moon with the old moon in her arms," in which extremes meet in an entirely literal sense and the same preposition carries the burden of the relationship. Since the "miracle of rare device" represents the union of the mind and its borrowed content in a highly compressed, non-naturalistic image, it might well be the practical equivalent of a "symbol" according to Coleridge's definition in *The Statesman's Manual*, a work also published in 1816: "It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative." Shedd, I, 437-438.
23. Shawcross, I, 81, 86-87. Coleridge's psychological concepts are discussed by R. C. Bald, "Coleridge and *The Ancient Mariner*," in *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, ed. H. J. Davis, et al. (Ithaca, N. Y., 1940), pp. 21-22.
24. Shawcross, I, 202.
25. Letter to Daniel Stuart, May 13, 1816; Griggs, IV, 641.
26. Shawcross, I, 225.
27. Shawcross, I, 77.
28. Shawcross, I, 77.
29. The quotation is from Bostetter (p. 84), on the popular understanding of the headnote account.
30. See *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London, 1930), I, 129.
31. The original passage in Purchas uses "build" for what the emperor did: "In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace" (p. 472). Coleridge's quotation in the headnote is a step toward "decree": "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built." Suther (pp. 190-193) points out Coleridge's frequent identification of poets with king-figures.
32. See Lowes, p. 358 n.
33. Raysor, II, 47.
34. With the difference in effect between the dreamvision and the vision of the damsel, cf. Coleridge's distinction between dreaming and aesthetic illusion: "In sleep the sensations, and with these the emotions and passions which they counterfeit, are the causes of our dream-images, while in our waking hours our emotions are the effects of the images presented to us." Raysor, I, 129. Cf. Griggs, IV, 641-642.
35. See Martin Kallich, "The Meaning of Archibald Alison's *Essays on Taste*," *Philological Quarterly*, XXVII (1948), 317, 323.
36. Shawcross, II, 14.
37. Shawcross, II, 16.
38. "The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination." Shawcross, II, 12.

## Criticism: George G. Watson (essay date 1966)

SOURCE: Watson, George G. "'Kubla Khan.'" In *Coleridge: The Ancient Mariner and Other Poems, A Casebook*, edited by Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman, pp. 221-34. London: Macmillan, 1973.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1966, Watson sees "Kubla Khan" as "a poem about poetry" and a premonition of Coleridge's subsequent critical statements concerning the transformative qualities of the imagination and his definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."]



Before he was twenty-six years old, and before the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* appeared, Coleridge had made himself a poet of many languages: an apprentice in many styles, and already a master of some, as 'The Ancient Mariner', 'Christabel', and 'Frost at Midnight' all variously show. He was perhaps the first European poet to set himself the task of achieving a wide diversity of styles based upon models other than classical ones; the undertaking, after all, would have seemed barbarous nonsense to an Augustan, and unthinkable to a Renaissance poet. 'Kubla Khan' is ... difficult ... to interpret ... but then by the late 1790s Coleridge might be said to have earned some right to be difficult. He was ready for ingenious solutions. Perhaps ingenuity is too pale a word to describe his poetic strength at this moment, at the height of his talent; but some of his solutions, like that in the 'Mariner' of giving a medieval dress to the most modern of themes, impress above all by their calculation and their temerity.

All this prepares for the confession that some aspects of 'Kubla Khan' remain inexplicable. The metre, for a start, is like nothing at all. The matter of dating might have proved crucial here, but unfortunately it remains inconclusive, and the traditional composition-date of May 1798 (*Poetical Works*, p. 295), which would leave the poem just later than the 'Mariner' and probably later than the beginning of 'Christabel', has been challenged in favour of Coleridge's own date of 1797 and, less plausibly, in favour of 1799-1800. If the poem is later than any part of 'Christabel', then its rhythm would represent a marked reaction back towards the heavy iambic beat of traditional English verse:

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 ...

(*Poetical Works*, p. 297)

The comparison with 'Christabel' is the more tempting since both poems are largely composed in four-footers; but it is impossible to explain, though easy to applaud, the strange compromise whereby 'Kubla Khan' moves in the most traditional of iambics from paragraph to paragraph in a rhyme-scheme that is always present, and yet neither stanzaic nor yet like an ode. The language of the poem is problematical too, given the bare facts that it is by Coleridge and of the 1790's. Unlike the 'Mariner' and 'Christabel', it is in contemporary English, a fact which would pose no sort of puzzle for most poems in most ages, but which is very like a suspicious circumstance here. As a matter of fact, the suspicion is justified. Coleridge's source, to which he drew attention in the preface of 1816, on first publishing the poem side by side with 'Christabel', is a source in Jacobean prose: not the richly convoluted Jacobean of Jeremy Taylor which he was to imitate in the prose gloss to the 'Mariner', but the homespun Jacobean of Hakluyt's assistant Samuel Purchas. Coleridge obligingly quotes, or rather misquotes, the passage from Purchas's *Pilgrimage* (1613) in his preface to the poem. It actually reads:

In Xaindu did Cublai Can build a stately pallace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile meddowes, pleasant springs, delightful streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure. ...

(iv xi)

It is easy to imagine what Coleridge in another mood might have made of that. In fact he rejects from it everything that is beguilingly of its period—'encompassing', 'beasts of chase and game', 'in the midst thereof.' The poem is apparently modern. Much of it offers a kind of dynamic precision of language which is quite unlike the English of any age previous to Coleridge's:

... 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.

If 'Kubla Khan' is a poem of the *annus mirabilis* of 1797-8, as still seems likely, and late rather than early in that year, then it is a striking inversion of Coleridgean formula. Instead of putting on the language of another, Coleridge has in this instance stripped it off. This is not to say that the language of the poem, or even of the first paragraph, is merely residual. It has too much life of its own for that. But its modernity is itself a device.

Such ingenuities ought to underline our uncertainty concerning the poet's purpose in 'Kubla Khan.' The fact is that almost everything is known about the poem except what it is about. Scholarship has been lavished upon the problem of dating. The very farmhouse in Culbone, a tiny village on the Somerset coast where the poet may have been interrupted in his composition, as he tells us in the 1816 preface, by 'a person on business from Porlock', has been plausibly identified. The allegedly creative effects of opium-taking have been experimentally investigated and on the whole discredited. But an interpretation of the poem that is generally acceptable is no nearer than ever. Even Humphry House in his Clark Lectures, though he called it 'a triumphant positive statement of the potentialities of poetry',<sup>1</sup> fumbled in his conclusion, narrowly missed the point of the poem, and failed to show how its logic works.

Taking heart from the medical evidence, which discounts the notion that opium produces either dreams in sleep or waking hallucinations, I shall dismiss one troublesome possibility at once. The Crewe manuscript of 1810, now in the British Museum, announces in Coleridge's own hand that the poem was 'composed in a sort of reverie.' By 1816, in the subtitle to the first printed version, the poem is rather bafflingly described as 'A Vision in a Dream', and the preface claims it was composed in 'a profound sleep' of about three hours. Coleridge's own accounts, then, are something less than self-consistent; but even if they had been so, it would still be clear that 'Kubla Khan' is not in any formal sense a dream-poem, however it may have been composed. This is not to say that Coleridge's own accounts of how it came to be written are either mendacious or mistaken, though (after a lapse of a dozen years and more) it would not be surprising or disgraceful if they proved unreliable. It is simply that the poem is not a dream-poem in the technical sense, like Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, or Coleridge's own poems 'The Pains of Sleep' and 'Phantom or Fact'; except in the single detail of the damsel with the dulcimer, that is, it does not purport to relate the experience of a dream. Whether it is 'dreamlike' is a matter of definition. For some unexplained reason, that word is commonly applied to the vague, shadowy or mystical, though dreams themselves hardly ever seem to be like this: *Alice in Wonderland*, which is none of these things, surely offers a much more convincing example of what they can be like. Few wide-awake readers will find Lowes's defence of Coleridge's 1816 preface convincing:

Nobody in his waking senses could have fabricated those amazing eighteen lines [from 'A damsel with a dulcimer ...']. For if anything ever bore the infallible marks of authenticity, it is that dissolving panorama in which fugitive hints of Aloadine's Paradise succeed each other with the vivid incoherence, and the illusion of natural and expected sequence, and the sense of an identity that yet is not identity, which are the distinctive attributes of dreams.<sup>2</sup>

But it is not at all obvious that the poem is incoherent. In fact it is wonderfully of a piece. Peacock saw this point at once, in an article he drafted in 1818 in reply to the reviewers within two years of its publication. 'There are very few specimens of lyrical poetry,' he argued, 'so plain, so consistent, so completely *simplex et unum* from first to last' as 'Kubla Khan'; and he dismisses the 1816 preface boldly:

as the story of its having been composed in his sleep must necessarily, by all who are acquainted with his manner of narrating matter of fact, be received with a certain degree of scepticism, its value of a psychological curiosity is nothing; and whatever value it has is in its

poetic merit alone.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, Coleridge's own views about dreams seem to have been interpretative, more so than Lowes's phrase 'dissolving panorama' would suggest, and he may not have thought 'Kubla Khan' any the less significant or shapely for representing 'a vision in a dream.' Dreams, like poems, seem to have had for him 'a logic of their own':

Call it a moment's work (and such it seems)  
This tale's a fragment from the life of dreams;  
But say that years matur'd the silent strife,  
And 'tis a record from the dream of life

(*Poetical Works*, p. 485)

Dreams have significance, like life itself, and demand interpretation. Certainly 'Kubla Khan' is a difficult poem, in the sense that it calls for careful exegesis based on a good deal of information about Coleridge's intellectual preoccupations. But it is not muddled. It may sound faint praise to some to call it one of the best organized of all Coleridge's works: more explicit, perhaps, to remark that it is one of those poems that seem all bones, so firm and self-assertive is the structure. It is not even, on the face of it (to continue the argument as if the troublesome preface did not exist), an emotionally intense poem, apart from the last half-dozen lines. Much of its tone is matter-of-fact, informative, even slightly technical, as if Coleridge was anxious, as he is in the opening section of the 'Mariner', to get his measurements right. And it is worth noticing at once that he does get them right. The reader is enabled and encouraged to construct a model, or draw a map, of the Khan's whole device, and it can be no accident that the figure 'five', mentioned in the sixth line, 'So twice five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers were girdled round ...' is repeated in l.25: 'Five miles meandering with a mazy motion ....' (This is corrected from 'twice six miles' in the Crewe manuscript.) The walls are ten miles long, in fact, in order to surround the five-mile stretch of the sacred river that is above the surface of the earth. Besides, as many have noticed, there seems to be nothing fragmentary about the poem as it survives, in spite of the 1816 subtitle 'A Fragment': it seems to say all it has to say. And the logical progression of the poem is unusually good, each of its four paragraphs being an advance upon its predecessor, and each one tightly organized within itself. All this is not to deny that Coleridge may have composed the poem in a dream, but only to insist that the dream-hypothesis is unhelpful, and even—in so far as it may encourage the reader to let down his guard and disregard what the poem is saying—something of a nuisance.

What is 'Kubla Khan' about? This is, or ought to be, an established fact of criticism: 'Kubla Khan' is a poem about poetry. It is probably the most original poem about poetry in English, and the first hint outside his notebooks and letters that a major critic lies hidden in the twenty-five-year-old Coleridge. Anyone who objects that there is not a word about poetry in it should be sent at once to the conclusion and asked, even if he has never read any Plato, what in English poetry this is like:

Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

There are dozens of parallels in Renaissance English to this account of poetic inspiration, all based—though rarely at first hand—on Plato's view of poetic madness in the *Ion* or the *Phaedrus*. Shakespeare's banter about 'the poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is perhaps the most famous. The 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair' of Coleridge's poem belong to a poet in the fury of creation. Verbal resemblances to the text of Plato itself confirm that the last paragraph of the poem is a prolonged Platonic allusion. Socrates, in the *Ion*, compares lyric poets to 'Bacchic maidens who draw *milk and honey* from the rivers when under the influence of Dionysus' and adds that poets 'gather their strains from *honied fountains*

out of the gardens and dells of the Muses. ...’ Ion himself, describing the effects of poetic recitation, confesses that ‘when I speak of horrors, my hair stands on end. ...’ The very phrase ‘holy dread’ is Platonic (*Laws* 671D). That ‘Kubla Khan’ is in some sense a comment on Plato’s theory of poetry is not really in doubt.

Given that ‘Kubla Khan’ is about poetry, its general direction is not difficult to discern, and real problems only arise in trying to account for detail after detail in terms of its total significance. The fifty-four lines of the poem divide clearly at line 36. The first section, often in coldly literal detail, describes the Khan’s ‘rare device.’ Purchas’s *Pilgrimage* (1613) tells us hardly more than that the Khan built a movable palace in a beautifully enclosed park. Coleridge is much more specific, and concentrates many of Purchas’s details, and some others, into a closely consistent picture. The park in the poem is a mixture of the natural and the artificial, at once a wilderness and a garden, and what is man-made contains, or is contained in, the wild and uncontrollable:

And here were forests ancient as the hills  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

Though the whole design is of course artificial—an enclosed park centering upon a palace or ‘stately pleasure-dome’—it contains within itself, as its unique possession, something utterly natural and uncontrollable: the sacred river itself, for the rest of its course subterranean, bursts into the light at this point and flows violently above ground before sinking back. It is evidently for this reason that the tyrant chose the site for his palace, which stands so close to the water that it casts its shadow upon it and is within earshot of the sound of the river, both above and below ground. And these two sounds harmonize:

Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.

With full emphasis upon the effect of harmonious contrast, the first section ends.

The second begins on an apparently irrelevant note, but its relevance is justified at once: the song of an Abyssinian girl, once heard in a dream, is capable of moving such ‘deep delight’ that

I would build that dome in air ...

‘In air’ presumably means not substantially but as a poem, and the reader’s first instinct is to say that this is just what Coleridge has done. But this is evidently wrong. The syntax makes it very clear that the project remains unfulfilled:

And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry ...

‘Kubla Khan’, then, is not just about poetry: it is about two kinds of poem. One of them is there in the first thirty-six lines of the poem; and though the other is nowhere to be found, we are told what it would do to the reader and what it would do to the poet. The reader would be able to visualize a palace and park he had never seen; and the poet would behave after the classic manner of poets, like a madman. This second poem, a poem that does not exist, is so evidently the real thing that it is clear that the poem of the first thirty-six lines is not—not quite a poem at all, in Coleridge’s terms. And if it is asked why Coleridge in 1798 would be likely to find ll.1-36 unpoetical, the question is already answered. They are factual, detailed, matter-of-fact. It is well known precisely why Coleridge objected to ‘matter-of-factness’ in poetry—the very word, in his view, was his own coinage. In the *Biographia Literaria*, written nearly twenty years later, he lists this quality as the second of Wordsworth’s defects as a poet:

... a matter-of-factness in certain poems ... a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects. ...

(BL xxii)

This may sound rather remote from the twenty-five-year-old poet who wrote 'Kubla Khan.' But Hazlitt, if his evidence is to be trusted (and it may have been conditioned by a reading of this passage in the *Biographia*, which appeared in 1817), supplies the one detail to complete the case. In his essay 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', published in the third number of *The Liberal* (April 1823) he tells how Coleridge had made the same objection to some of Wordsworth's poems in a walk near Nether Stowey in June 1798, only a few weeks after the most probable date of composition of 'Kubla Khan.' Coleridge, says Hazlitt:

lamented that Wordsworth was not prone enough to believe in the traditional superstitions of the place, and that there was something corporeal, a *matter-of-fact-ness*, a clinging to the palpable, or often to the petty, in his poetry in consequence ... He said, however (if I remember right) that this objection must be confined to his descriptive pieces, that his philosophic poetry had a grand and comprehensive spirit in it, so that his soul seemed to inhabit the universe like a palace, and to discover truth by intuition rather than by deduction.

Here are two kinds of poetry, and evidence too that this preoccupation of Coleridge's career as a critic was already present in the fertile year of 1797-8. In a sense, it is the same question that led him, in the years that followed, into the period of intense critical activity that began with *The Friend* in 1809 and culminated in the composition of the *Biographia Literaria* in 1815. How far may poetry be purely informative and descriptive? Coleridge's answer, in effect, was 'Ideally, never.' Information is not the characteristic business of poetry. Poetry may have an informative effect, may leave us 'sadder and wiser', as the Mariner's tale left the Wedding Guest. But it ought not to proceed, as some of Wordsworth's lesser poems do, by a mere aggregation of detail ('Tis three feet long and two feet wide'). This, on its simplest and most practical level, is the force of Coleridge's imagination/fancy distinction, and there is evidence beyond Hazlitt, in Coleridge's own notebooks and letters, to show how early he hit upon it as a summary of his case for and against Wordsworth's poetry. An early letter of 15 January 1804, addressed to Richard Sharp, contains a full outline of the distinction:

Imagination, or the *modifying* power in that highest sense of the word, in which I have ventured to oppose it to fancy, or the *aggregating* power.

(CL, ii 1,034)

The interrupted discussion at the end of the thirteenth chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, where the 'essentially vital' power of imagination is contrasted with the 'fixities and definites' of fancy, fills out the account of a dozen years earlier. But the letter of 1804 is precise enough, and early enough, to make it reasonable to suppose that the young poet of 'Kubla Khan' may already have been close to such a conclusion.

There are two aspects of the imagination-fancy distinction which, obvious as they are, tend perhaps to be overlooked. The first is that it is a value-distinction. 'Imagination' is the power that writes good poems: 'fancy' writes inferior ones. There is no such thing, in Coleridgean terms, as a bad imaginative poem. If the 'shaping spirit' really has shaped, if the poem is more than a sum of its parts and more than a mere aggregate of the poet's perceptions, then it is so far good. Secondly, the distinction is an historical one: it derives from a view of the whole past of English poetry. It is the decisive innovation of the romantic poet to write imaginative poems rather than fanciful ones, just as it was the characteristic role of the Augustans to condemn themselves to a poetry 'addressed to the fancy or the intellect' (BL i). Wordsworth, in this view, bestrides both worlds and is pathetically capable of both, and the *Biographia* is a belated plea inviting him to recognize both his excellence and his failings. But is just here, at this confident moment of exegesis, that an embarrassing

choice emerges in the interpretation of 'Kubla Khan.' Given that it is a poem about two kinds of poetry, and that Coleridge's classic distinction may have been present to him, in essence at least, as early as 1798, there is no need to resist the conclusion that its first thirty-six lines are 'fanciful' and the remainder a programme for imaginative creation. But I do not know that there is any clear reason for assigning the fancifulness of the first section of the poem to what Coleridge disliked in the aristocratic poetry of the Augustan era, or to what he disliked in some of Wordsworth's, or to what he disliked in some of his own. The orientalism of the setting of the poem masks, and perhaps deliberately, its critical purpose.

Certainly the Khan is very like a tyrannical aristocrat as seen through romantic and liberal eyes. This is an aspect of the poem that might easily have seemed too obvious, in the years around 1800, to be worth mentioning, but it needs to be emphasized in an age which finds tyrants engagingly exotic, even to the point of supposing Kubla a model of the creative artist. The very fact that he is an oriental despot would have been reason enough in the late eighteenth century to excite hostility. To this day the French retain the word *turquerie* to describe a brutal act. Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) is one of the many oriental tales of the period, French and English, that hint at the exotic vices of eastern potentates. And there is nothing improbable about identifying eighteenth-century aristocratic failings with the medieval or modern East. Cowper vents an Englishman's indignation in the fifth book of *The Task* (1785) against Catherine the Great's ingenious Palace of Ice, a 'most magnificent and mighty freak' made without saw or hammer, a 'brittle prodigy':

a scene

Of evanescent glory, once a stream  
And soon to slide into a stream again ...  
'Twas transient in its nature, as in show

'Twas durable: as worthless, as it seem'd  
Intrinsically precious; to the foot  
Treach'rous and false; it smil'd, and it was cold.

Great princes have great playthings ...  
But war's a game which, were their subjects wise,  
Kings would not play at.

Keats in 'Sleep and Poetry' does not invoke the East to damn what he supposed the triviality of Augustan poetry; but the language he uses might be aptly used of the Khan. English poetry between the Elizabethans and the moderns he sees as a sterile interlude, 'a schism Nurtured by foppery and barbarism':

with a puling infant's force

They sway'd about upon a rocking horse  
And thought it Pegasus.

The Khan, too, may be something of a barbarous fop. And if this seems a lofty and remote view of the East, it should be recalled that accurate orientalism is an extreme rarity in England before the Victorians; the orientalism of the early Romantics derives from experiences like the childhood reading of the *Arabian Nights* that Wordsworth refers to in the *Prelude* (v 482f.). It is colourful, picturesque, and indifferent to accuracy, at once fascinated and dismissive. Southey sums up the attitude that Coleridge is likely to have shared in his notes and preface to *Thalaba* (1801), a Moslem tale he began in 1799 in a new metre which was to be 'The *arabesque* ornament of an Arabian tale.' No labour, in Southey's view, could be justified in getting oriental details right. No faithful translation from the Persian could make Firdausi's epic readable, and the *Arabian Nights*, which had first appeared in English in about 1705-8, were all the better for having passed through 'the filter of a French translation.' 'A waste of ornament and labour', as Southey puts it loftily, 'characterizes all the works of the Orientalists.' The East is not an object of study, but a place to let the imagination run riot in. And the chief excitement and source of horror lies in its despotism. Purchas offers rather an attractive picture of the Khan, as well as interesting details about his enormous, if fastidious, sexual appetite; but then Purchas

was a Jacobean and took autocracy for granted, and was also impressed by the fact that this Emperor of the Tartars in the 1260's had treated his European guests well and taken a sympathetic interest in Christianity. The sentence from Purchas that Coleridge scribbled in his notebook emphasizes merely his despotism:

the greatest prince in peoples, cities, and kingdoms that ever was in the world.

(CN 1,840)

The overwhelmingly important fact about the 'pleasure-dome' of the poem, with its surrounding park, is its artificiality. It is a 'miracle of rare device', despotically willed into existence as a tyrant's toy:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree ... '

The authoritarian word 'decree' is not in Purchas, who simply says: 'In Xaindu did Cublai Can build a stately pallace ...' And the painfully contrived quality of the tyrant's pleasure becomes clearer with every line: in the formal, though not entirely formal, gardens, and the trivial purpose to which the brute strength of the sacred river has been harnessed. The reader is meant to be left with a disagreeable image of the patron himself, congratulating himself on his facile ingenuity in degrading a matchless natural phenomenon to the service of a landscape garden—in itself a very Augustan pleasure—in order to flatter his own megalomaniac dreams:

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

In his artistic tastes, at least, he reminds one a little of the young Alexander Pope's complacent view of Windsor Park:

Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain,  
Here earth and water seem to strive again;  
Not Chaos-like together crush'd and bruis'd,  
But, as the world, harmoniously confus'd.

*Windsor-Forest* (1713), ll. 11-14

'In perusing French tragedies,' Coleridge remarked years later, 'I have fancied two marks of admiration at the end of each line, as hieroglyphics of the author's own admiration at his own cleverness' (*BL* i). Kubla's arrogance is much like this. If only he knew it, the poem hints, he has bitten off much more than he can chew.

For all the violence of great emotional experience survives there in the river, contained by the Khan's device much as Augustan poems seem to contain and even to sterilize the emotions of man: 'thoughts *translated* into the language of poetry', as Coleridge later complained of Pope. The vast power of the river is allowed to rise, but only 'momently', and then sinks back into silence, 'a lifeless ocean.' This is surely not the River of Life. It is the river of the poetry of imagination which, under the old literary order, had been debased into a plaything and allowed its liberty only if 'girdled round.' The passage that describes the river as it rushes above ground is dense with the imagery of the violent reshaping of dull matter, like the 'essentially vital' power of the imagination working upon objects 'essentially fixed and dead' (*BL* xiii):

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 ...

The poem is profoundly elusive in other ways, but there is something uncharacteristically familiar about Coleridge's imagery here, so commonly are rivers and springs associated with poetry in classical and Renaissance poetry. The very name 'Alph' offers an easy clue in its resemblance to the Alpheus of Milton's 'Lycidas', where it is associated with the Sicilian Muse of pastoral poetry. And the river of poetry was a preoccupation of some Romantics too. In his preface to the sonnets on *The River Duddon* (1820) Wordsworth was later to urge Coleridge to revive an old project of their Somerset year, a poem describing the course of a symbolic river to be called 'The Brook' (BL x). 'There is a sympathy in streams', as he put it invitingly. The sacred river is the most traditional element in a poem otherwise evasive in its sophistication.

The triumph of 'Kubla Khan', perhaps, lies in its evasions: it hints so delicately at critical truths while demonstrating them so boldly. The contrast between the two halves of the poem, between the terrible emergence of the imaginative power in the first, 'momently forced', and its Dionysiac victory in the second, is bold enough to distract attention from the business at hand. So bold, indeed, that Coleridge for once was able to dispense with any language out of the past. It was his own poem, a manifesto. To read it now, with the hindsight of another age, is to feel premonitions of the critical achievement to come: phrases like 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings',<sup>4</sup> or 'the imagination ... dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create' (BL xiii), lie only a little below the surface of the poem. But the poem is in advance, not just of these, but in all probability of any critical statement that survives. It may be that it stands close to the moment of discovery itself.

#### Notes

1. H. House, *Coleridge* (London, 1953) p. 116.
2. J. L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Boston, Mass., 1927; rev. ed. 1930) p. 363.
3. 'An Essay on Fashionable Literature', Halliford edition of the *Works of Peacock*, edited by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones (London, 1934) viii 291, 290.
4. Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), an essay in some degree a work of collaboration between the two poets.

## Criticism: Kenneth Burke (essay date 1966)

SOURCE: Burke, Kenneth. "'Kubla Khan': Proto-Surrealist Poem." In *Modern Critical Views: Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Harold Bloom, pp. 33-52. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1966, Burke analyzes "Kubla Khan" in the context of Coleridge's other "mystery poems"—including "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel"—explaining its linguistic references, mythic patterns of death and rebirth, and underlying unity.]

Let's begin at the heart of the matter, and take up the "problems" afterwards. Count me among those who would view this poem both as a marvel, and as "in principle" *finished* (and here is a "problem," inasmuch as Coleridge himself refers to "Kubla Khan" as a "fragment").

Conceivably, details could be added, to amplify one or another of the three movements. And some readers (I am not among them) might especially feel the need of transitional lines to bridge the ellipsis between the middle and final stanzas. But as regards the relationship among the three stages of the poem's development, its unfolding seems to me no less trimly demarcated than the strophes of a Greek chorus, or (more relevantly) the Hegelian pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Whatever may have got lost, the three stanzas in their overall progression tick off a perfect form, with beginning, middle, and end respectively. Thus:



Stanza One (Thesis) amplifies the theme of the beatific vision. Stanza Two (Antithesis) introduces and develops the sinister, turbulent countertheme (plus, at the close, a notably modified recall of the contrasting first theme). And the Third Stanza fuses the two motives in terms of a beatific vision (the “damsel with a dulcimer”) seen by a poetic “I,” the mention of whom, despite the euphoria, leads to the cry, “Beware! Beware!” and to talk of a “dread” that, however “holy,” in a sinister fashion is felt to befit the idealistic building of this particular air castle.

In *The Road to Xanadu*, John Livingston Lowes brought an infectious combination of research and spirited delight to the tracking down of possible literary sources behind Coleridge's great poems of Fascination (an enterprise further justified by the fact that Coleridge was so notoriously omnivorous a reader, and one of his memorandum books listed texts containing many references to caverns, chasms, mazes, sunken rivers, fountains, and the like). By consulting Lowes the reader will discover that nearly every notable term or reference in the poem appeared (often with quite relevant applications and combinations) in other passages that Coleridge is quite likely to have seen. But though greatly enjoying the charm of Lowes's presentation, and having on many occasions consulted his book when working on Coleridge, I should begin by pointing out that our present job involves a quite different trend of investigation (an investigation in which Lowes's book can be of great help, though his interest is directed otherwise).

There is a sense in which poets can be said to have special nomenclatures, just as scientists or philosophers do. But this situation is concealed from us by the fact that, rather than inventing a special word for some particular conceptual purpose, or pausing to define some particular application he is giving to a word in common usage, a poet leaves the process implicit, even though he uses the common idiom in his peculiar way. (For instance, the term “fish” in Theodore Roethke's poems would have little in common with the article of food we might buy in a market or order in a restaurant.) And by collating all the contexts that help define a word as it figures in a given poet's work, we can discern respects in which it is part of a nomenclature essentially as specialized as “entelechy” in the philosophy of Aristotle, or “relativity” with particular reference to the theories of Einstein. So, thinking along those lines, insofar as I'd risk looking up from the immediate text, I'd tend to ask about uses of a given term in other works *by Coleridge* rather than asking (like Lowes) about possible sources in *other* writers. For instance, people have doubtless talked about fountains since they could talk at all. And Coleridge's reference to the sacred river, Alph, does unquestionably suggest the ancient myth of the river Alpheus that sank into the ground and emerged as the fountain Arethusa (a belief which Lowes shows to have merged with notions about the sources of the Nile). I'd tend to start matters from a concern with the themes of submergence and emergence, with the Alpheus-Arethusa *pattern* as a symbolizing of *rebirth*, regardless of who else happened to speak of it. Or take this comment in Lowes:

In April, 1798, Coleridge who had been suffering from an infected tooth, wrote as follows, in a letter to his brother George:

Laudanum gave me repose, not sleep; but you, I believe, know how divine that repose is,  
*what a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees in the very heart  
of a waste of sands!*

Now when Coleridge wrote that, he was recalling and echoing, consciously or unconsciously, something else. For in the Note Book (which, as we know, belongs to this same period) appears this memorandum:

—*some wilderness-plot, green and fountainous and unviolated by Man.*

Lowes then asks, “Is it possible to discover what lies behind this note?” He proceeds to discover, in Bartram's *Travels*, the expressions “blessed unviolated spot of earth!” and “the enchanting spot.” And he notes that two pages earlier Bartram had written: “the dew-drops twinkle and play ... on the tips of the lucid, green savanna,

sparkling” beside a “serpentine rivulet, meandering over the meadows.” As approached from Lowes's point of view, the serpentine, meandering rivulet would seem to touch upon the “sacred river, / Five miles meandering with a mazy motion”; the “dew-drops” might impinge upon “honey-dew”; and so on. But of primary importance for *our present investigations* is not the question of where Coleridge may have read words almost identical with “spot of enchantment,” but the fact that he used the expression in this particular context (in association with laudanum). And the reference to “honey-dew” would lead us, not to such a reference as *Bartram's* “dew-drops,” but rather to a pair of quite contrasting references in “The Ancient Mariner,” the first a dew like the sweat of anguish (“From the sails the dew did drip”), the second the dew of refreshment after release from the dreadful drought (“I dreamt that they were filled with dew; / And when I awoke, it rained”). Or we might recall the voice “As soft as honey-dew” that, though gentle, pronounced a fatal sentence: “The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do.” And above all, I should rejoice to encounter in another poem (“Youth and Age”) an explicit recognition of this term's convertibility: “Dew-drops are the gems of morning, / But the tears of mournful eve.” In a juvenile poem, there is a related expression, “inebriate with dew.” And I should never feel wholly content until I could also fit in one of the jottings from *Anima Poetae* that widens the circle of associations by reference to “a voice that suits a dream, a voice in a dream, a voice soundless and yet for the *ear* and not for the *eye* of the soul” (for often eye and ear can represent quite different orders of motivation).

In brief, the student of any one poet's nomenclature has more to learn from a concordance of his work (a purely *internal* inspection of a term's “sources” in its own range of contexts) than from an inspection of possible borrowings (except in the broadest sense, as when a scholar cites usages by an older writer's contemporaries to help establish the likelihood that a given term was being used in a sense local to that period but now obsolete).

In fact, the many interesting documents which Lowes assembles as inductive proof of expressions which Coleridge derived or adapted from his reading, might with much justice be interpreted quite differently, as indication that Coleridge was but responding “naturally” to the implications of such imagery. For instance, one might conceivably not require a prior text to help him discover that the image of a maze can adequately stand for a certain kind of emotional entanglement or “amazement,” and that the greenery of an oasis in a desert provides an adequate image for an idea of refuge. And presumably travel books select such things to talk about for the very reason that their sheer “factuality” follows along the grooves of man's spontaneous imagination. Be that as it may, Lowes's study of possible derivation with regard to possible private literary sources contains much material that can be applied to the study of “associations” in two senses that Lowes was not concerned with: (1) their relation to “mythic” or “archetypal” forms of thought that do not rely on historical sources for their derivation; and (2) their relation to a nomenclature that, at notable points, may be uniquely Coleridgean (in that they possess personal connotations not to be found in any dictionary, and not precisely appreciated by us who read them, as it were, without quite the proper accent).

In any case, for the most part, we shall interpret the poem by looking for what now would often be called “archetypal” sources rather than for Lowes's possible derivations from other sources (while occasionally considering the areas at which the two kinds of inquiry seem to overlap).

Even if, as regards its actual origin, we choose to accept without question Coleridge's statement that the poem is the spontaneous product of a dream (and thus arose without artistic purpose), when viewing it as a work of art we must ask what kind of effect it “aims” to produce. I'd propose to answer that question roundabout, thus:

In the *Poetics*, among the resources that Aristotle says contribute to the effectiveness of tragedy as a literary species he lists a sense of the “marvelous” (*to thaumaston*). The overall purpose involved in tragedy is “catharsis,” while various other resources serve in one way or another to make the sense of purgation most effective. The Cornelian “theater of admiration” played down the principle of catharsis as exemplified in the Attic plays. And it so altered the proportions of the tragic ingredients that one particular kind of the

“marvelous” (the cortège-like neoclassic pomp of such plays' courtly style) rose in the scale from a means to an end. The appeal to our sense of the marvelous takes many other forms, and among the variations I would include Coleridge's great “Mystery” poems (or poems of “Fascination”): “Kubla Khan,” “The Ancient Mariner,” and “Christabel.” Indeed, they come closer to a sense of the marvelous that Aristotle had in mind, since he was discussing ways whereby the playwright might endow a plot with the aura of supernatural fatality; and in his *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge says of his part in the volume of “Lyrical Ballads” containing work by him and Wordsworth:

it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

And previously in the same text:

the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in *this* sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.

Though Coleridge does not mention “Kubla Khan” in this connection (it was not published at that time), when judged as a poem it obviously appeals by producing much the same kind of effect. That is, its *mystery* endows it with a feeling of *fatality*. Presumably “The Ancient Mariner” also had its “archetypal” origins in a dream, told to Coleridge by a friend of his, though greatly modified, as Wordsworth testifies, by Coleridge's own additions. And few works have a more strangely dreamlike quality than “Christabel.” The sinister element that lies about the edges of these poems attains its blunt documentary completion in the nightmares of guilt, remorse, or woe he describes in “The Pains of Sleep,” with such clinical testimony as the lines:

The third night, when my own loud scream  
Had waked me from the fiendish dream,  
O'ercome with sufferings strange and wild,  
I wept as I had been a child;  
And having thus by tears subdued  
My anguish to a milder mood,  
My punishments, I said, were due  
To natures deepliest stained with sin,—  
For aye entempesting anew  
The unfathomable hell within,  
The horror of their deeds to view,  
To know and loathe, yet wish and do!  
Such griefs with such men well agree,  
But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?

Before considering “Kubla Khan” in detail, I cite this piece (which Coleridge himself specifically mentions as a “contrast”) because of my conviction that it brings out the full implication of the sinister potentialities one finds faint traces of in the predominantly euphoric state symbolized by pleasure dome, Edenic garden, and “a damsel with a dulcimer” (surely one of the most euphonious lines in the language). And now, to the poem in detail:

The first stanza, obviously, is the beatific vision of an Edenic garden, enclosed (“girdled round”) in a circle of protection. In the third stanza the idea of encirclement will take on quite different connotations (“Weave a circle round him thrice”). To the generally recognized connotations of “Alph” as both “Alpheus” and

“Alpha,” I would offer but one addition; yet I submit that it is essential to an understanding of many notable details in the poem. As I have tried to show in my *Grammar of Motives* (on “the temporizing of essence”) and in my *Rhetoric of Religion* (particularly the section on “The First Three Chapters of *Genesis*”), the proper narrative, poetic, or “mythic” way to deal with fundamental motives is in terms of *temporal* priority. In this mode of expression, things deemed most basic are said to be *first in time*. So a river whose name suggests the first letter of the alphabet in an ancient language (one can as well hear the Hebrew form, “Aleph”) is indeed well named. And fittingly, therefore, the forests are called “ancient as the hills.” For this stanza is designed to convey in narrative, or “mythic” (or “archetypal”) terms the very *essence* of felicity (the creative “joy” that, in his poignant ode “Dejection,” written about two years later, Coleridge will bemoan the permanent loss of, since his “genial spirits fail,” and he “may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within”).

True, in the first stanza, there is no specific reference to a fountain. But when we recall the passage already quoted from a letter to his brother (concerning a “divine repose” that is like “a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees in the very heart of a waste of sands”), we can see how, so far as the associations within Coleridge’s private nomenclature were concerned, the reference to “sunny spots of greenery” (plus the connotations of Alph) had already set the terministic conditions for the explicit emergence of a fountain. And the thought might also induce us to ask whether, beyond such a “spot of enchantment” there might also be lurking some equivalent to the “waste of sands” for which it is medicinal.

In any case, given what we now know about the imagery of man’s ideal beginnings, would we not take it for granted that the “caverns” traversed by the river are leading us “back” to such a “sunless sea” as the womb-heaven of the amniotic fluid by which the fetus was once “girdled round” in Edenic comfort? (In one of his fragments, Coleridge characteristically depicts a “sot” luxuriating on a couch and exclaiming: “Would that this were work—*utinam hoc esset laborare!*”) In Lowes you can find literary “sources” for the fact that the caverns are “measureless.” It is also a fact that they *should* be measureless for the simple reason that they connote an ideal time wholly alien to the knowledge of numbers. On the other hand, the garden spot is measured (“twice five miles”) since such finiteness helps suggest connotations of protective enclosure, as with the medieval ideal of the *hortus conclusus* which Leo Spitzer has discussed in his monograph on “Milieu and Ambiance.”

How far should we carry such speculations? We need not insist on it, but inasmuch as forests are of *wood* (thereby bringing us into the fate-laden Greek-Roman line of thought that commingles ideas of wood, matter, and mother: *hyle*, *dynamis*, *mater*, *materia*, *potentia*) the reference to them reinforces the feminine connotations of such a guarded and guardian garden.

So far as Coleridgean terminology in general is concerned, we might also note that green is not an unambiguous color. Christabel is to Geraldine as a dove is to a green snake coiled about her (“Swelling its neck as she swelled hers”). And when reading that Alph is a “sacred river,” we might bear in mind the well-known but sometimes neglected etymological fact that in Latin usage either a priest or a criminal was *sacer*, as with the fluctuancies between French *sacre* and *sacré* (the same ambiguities applying to Greek *hagios* and to the Hebrew concept of the “set apart,” *qodesh*, *qadesh*).

As for “stately”: We might recall that Geraldine’s bare neck was “stately.” And cutting in from another angle, I might cite a prose passage that I consider so basic to Coleridge’s thinking, I keep finding all sorts of uses for it. It is from *The Friend*, where the exposition is divided into what he calls “landing-places.” He is here discussing the sheer *form* of his presentation (the emphasis is mine):

Among my *earliest* impressions I still distinctly remember that of my *first* entrance into the *mansion* of a neighboring baronet, *awfully* known to me by the name of the great house, its exterior having been long *connected in my childish imagination* with the *feelings and fancies*

stirred up in me by the perusal of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. Beyond all other objects, I was most struck with the magnificent staircase, relieved at well-proportioned intervals by spacious landing-places, this adorned with grand or showy plants, the next looking out on an extensive prospect through the *stately* window ... while from the last and highest the eye commanded the *whole spiral ascent* with the marble pavement of the great hall; from which it seemed to spring up as if it merely used the ground on which it rested. My readers will find no difficulty in *translating these forms of the outward senses into their intellectual analogies*.

In sum, I'd say that references to the "decreeing" of this "stately pleasure-dome" combine connotations of infantile ("first" or "essential") felicity with concepts of hierarchal wonder. Though on its face the term fits well with the euphoria that so strikingly pervades the whole first stanza, and we shall later see the term applied to a hero, there is also the fact, as regards Coleridge's nomenclature in general, that it also applies to the sinister serpent-woman, Geraldine. Viewed in this light, it might be said to possess latent possibilities of trouble, an ambiguous announcement of a "problematical" theme that would become explicit later.

Similarly, despite my interpretation of "sunless" as uterine, I must concede its deathly connotations, particularly in view of the fact that the "sunless sea" will later be redefined as the "lifeless ocean." At best, we are on the edges of that midway, Life-in-Death stage which played so important a part in the sufferings of the Ancient Mariner. Or, otherwise put, any connotations of *rebirth* also imply connotations of *dying*.

In any case, the overall benignant tenor of the first stanza is so pronounced, the poetic conditions are set for a contrast, if the imaginative logic of the poem makes such a turn desirable. Thus, the second stanza is an amplification of the sinister meanings subsumed in the opening outcry: "But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!" On their face, chasms are cataclysmic, ghastly, and chaotic. "Athwart" on its face is troublous, to the extent that it has "thwart" in it. And as regards Coleridge's particular nomenclature, we might well adduce as evidence, from "Fears in Solitude," the lines, "the owlet Atheism, / Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon," though part of the damage here may be associated also with the time of day, since it was "The bloody Sun, at noon" that visited such torture on the Ancient Mariner. (More on these lines later.)

Though you may have felt that I was straining things as regards the ambiguities of "sacred" in the first stanza, surely you will grant that in this middle stanza such disturbances come to the fore, as regards the synonym "holy" with reference to "A savage place! ... enchanted" (recall the "spot of enchantment") and "haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!" I take it that the theme of the demon lover will return in a slightly transformed state near the end of the poem. As for the phase of the moon, Lowes notes: It was under the aegis of the "waning moon" that the Mariner's cure began. (It would be more accurate to say his *partial* cure; for we should always remember that that "grey-beard loon" was subject to periodic *relapses*, and then his anguish again drove him to confess his sense of guilt.)

Coleridge has so beautifully interwoven description of *natural motions* with words for *human actions*, one is hardly aware of the shifts between the two kinds of verbs (beginning as early as the pleasure dome, which is described as being *decreed*). Thus one hardly notes the "as if" in his reference to the "fast quick pants" with which the fountain is "breathing." All the descriptions are so saturated with *narrative*, one inevitably senses in them a principle of *personality*. (Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy" is carried to the point where everything is as active as in a picture by Breughel.) Though the observation applies to the poem throughout, we might illustrate the point by listing only the more obvious instances in the middle stanza: slanted, athwart, enchanted, waning, haunted, wailing, seething, breathing, forced, half-intermittent, vaulted, rebounding, flung up, meandering, ran, sank, heard, prophesying.

I would view this general hubbub as something more than a way of making descriptions vivid (though it certainly is at least that). I would take it also to indicate that this indeterminate mixture of motion and action is in effect a poetized *psychology*, detailing not what the reader is to *see* but what *mental states* he is thus empathically and sympathetically *imitating* as he reads.

I stress the notion because of my belief that it provides the answer to the problem of the “sunless sea” synonymized in the second stanza as a “lifeless ocean.” Though the reciprocal relation between the destination of the river and the emergence of the fountain justifies one in looking upon them as standing for aspects of a life force that bursts into creativity and sinks into death, I would contend that the central significance of this stream is somewhat more specific. The poem is figuring stages in a *psychology*—and in this sense the river is, first of all, the “stream of consciousness” (which is in turn inextricably interwoven with the river of *time*). That is, the design is not just depicting in general the course of *life and death*, plus connotations of rebirth. Rather, the poem is tracing in terms of imagery the very *form* of thinking (which is necessarily integral with a time process, inasmuch as the form of thinking must unfold through time.) It is as though, like Kantian transcendentalism, Coleridge were speculating epistemologically on the nature of consciousness, *except* that he is in effect talking of intuition in terms that are themselves the embodiment of what he is talking *about*. That's why Coleridge could say in his introduction to the poem:

The Author ... could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*.

In this respect, I repeat, the poem could be viewed as a highly personal, *poetic* analogue of Kantian transcendentalism, which sought *conceptually* to think about itself until it ended in a schematization of the forms necessarily implicit in its very act of thinking.

I have several reasons for wanting to insist that the image of the sacred river, in its journey to and from an ultimate reservoir of the “sunless” or “lifeless” is to be viewed thus, as more specifically tied to the *psychology of idealism* than just a figuring of life and death in general. For one thing (as per my paper, “Thanatopsis for Critics: a Brief Thesaurus of Deaths and Dying,” *Essays in Criticism*, October 1952) since poets at their best write only what they profoundly know (and beyond all doubt, “Kubla Khan” is one kind of poetry at its best) and inasmuch as no living poet has experienced death, I take it for granted that, when a poet speaks of death, he is necessarily talking about something else, something witnessed *from without*, like a funeral, whereas this poem is wholly *from within*. Similarly, as regards fictions about the “supernatural,” we need but consider the conduct of the “dead” sailors in “The Ancient Mariner” to realize that in the realm of the “supernatural” there *is* no death. Even in the “double death” of the orthodox Christian's Hell, the miserable wretches somehow carry on eternally. Or Whitman's paeans to Death indicate how Death becomes rather like the ultimate, maternal repository from which the forms of conscious life emerge (a pattern that also infuses thoughts on the ultimate end and source of things, in the second part of Goethe's *Faust*). Or think of the similar return to the “buttonmoulder,” in *Peer Gynt*. And to cap things, recall Coleridge's “Epitaph,” asking the reader to pray “That he who many a year with toil of breath / Found death in life, may here find life in death!”

Further, the realm of “essence” can never “die.” For instance, what destruction of all existing life in the universe could alter the essential “fact” that, if *a* is greater than *b* and *b* is greater than *c*, then *a* is greater than *c*? And what obliteration can be so total as to alter the fact that Napoleon's character, or “essence,” must go on having been exactly what it was?

If, on the other hand, we think of the river as more specifically interweaving the stream of time and the stream of consciousness (what Coleridge called the “streamy nature of association”), all comes clear. For there *is* a sense in which both time and thought continually hurry to their “death,” yet are continually “reborn,” since the death of one moment is incorporated in the moment that arises out of it, and the early stages of a thought

process are embedded in its fulfillment. Nor should we forget Coleridge's original declared intention with regard to the "supernatural, or at least romantic" as a device to transfer from our "inward nature" various "shadows of imagination."

For these reasons, if you choose to see the river and the fountain as figuring ultimately the course of life and death, I'd ask you at least to think of these more specific "transcendental" qualifications as relevant adjectives to your nouns. And certainly a note like this, in the Gutch Memorandum Notebook, is on our side: "There is not a new or strange opinion—Truth returns from banishment—a river run underground—fire beneath embers—." Also, in his Notebooks, when saying that in the best part of one's nature man must be solitary, he adds: "Man exists herein to himself & to God alone—Yea, in how much only to God—how much lies *below* his own Consciousness."

In any case, there is no questioning the fact that the Coleridgean nomenclature elsewhere does clearly give us personal (moral, psychological) equivalents for fountains and streams with mazy motion. The most relevant for our purposes is in "Dejection," a poem specifically concerned with the loss of such impulsive poetic ability as distinguishes "Kubla Khan":

My genial spirits fail;  
And what can these avail  
To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?  
It were a vain endeavour,  
Though I should gaze for ever  
On that green light that lingers in the west:  
I may not hope from outward forms to win  
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

In an expression some years later, he gives the word a decidedly moral twist, in referring to "my conscience, the sole fountain of certainty." In one letter, he refers to "the pure fountain of all my moral religious feelings and comforts,—I mean the absolute Impersonality of the Deity." And in a formal letter of condolence, written before the production of "Kubla Khan," he had given us a related moral significance for "chaff": "The pestilence of our lusts must be scattered, the strong-layed Foundations of our Pride blown up, and the stubble and chaff of our Vanities burnt, ere we can give ear to the inspeaking Voice of Mercy, "Why *will* ye die?" True, Lowes finds references to fountains that hurled forth various kinds of fragments, but he also cites a reference to an "enchanted and amazing chrystal fountain"; hence so far as "sources" in his sense are concerned, Coleridge could just as well have given us a fountain *without* "chaff." Thus, from the standpoint of "mythic" or "archetypal" sources, I'd say that Coleridge's creative fountain was a bit "problematical," as with the countertheme of this stanza generally; in effect this spirited (or breathy) upheaval had not yet separated the wheat from the tares, though it was intensely involved in the process of doing so.

"Mazy" is a word that turns up often in Coleridge. It's as characteristically his as "dim." (Though there is no "dim" in the poem itself, the introduction quotes lines that refer to "the fragments dim of lovely forms.") And if you want the range of troublous moral connotations that are packed into that word "mazy," consult a passage in "Religious Musings" (an earlier, somewhat bombastic poem that Charles Lamb greatly admired). Here Enmity, Mistrust, "listening Treachery" and War are said to falsely defend the "Lamb of God" and "Prince of Peace," whom

(in their songs

So bards of elder times had haply feigned)  
Some Fury fondled in her hate of man,  
Bidding her serpent hair in mazy surge  
Lick his young face, and at his mouth imbreath  
Horrible sympathy!

“Religious Musings” is quite a storehouse for expressions that reveal the moral implications in many of the most characteristic images found in the *Mystery*, or “Fascination,” Poems.

Though Lowes cites a text that refers to the prophecy of war (and in connection with *Abyssinia* even, an associate preparation, if you will, of the corresponding adjective in the final stanza), I’d view the line, “Ancestral voices prophesying war,” as a narrative way of saying in effect: “This tumultuous scene is *essentially* interwoven with such motives as we connote by the term “war.” Or, otherwise put: The war that is to break out *subsequently* is *already implicit* in the nature of things *now*. That is, I would interpret it as a typical stylistic device for the “temporizing of essence.” Such is always the significance of “portents,” that detect the *presence* of the future.

The stanza does not conclude by a simple return to the pleasure dome of the opening; for three notable details are added: We now learn of the dome’s “shadow”; it is said to have “floated midway” on the waves; and the caves are said to be “of ice.” Let us consider these additions.

In “The Ancient Mariner” we read that “where the ship’s huge shadow lay, / The charmed water burnt away / A still and awful red.” In a letter to Southey, written about three years after the probable production of “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge says regarding troubles with his wife that his sleep “became the valley of the shadows of Death.” (The same letter refers to “her inveterate habits of puny thwarting,” a phrase which please bear in mind for later reference, “and unintermitting dyspathy,” where the reader must decide for himself whether the participle throws connotative light upon the poem’s reference to the fountain’s “half-intermitted burst.”) In the explicitly moralistic use of imagery in “Religious Musings,” we are told that “Life is a vision shadowy of Truth; / And vice, and anguish, and the wormy grave, / Shapes of a dream!”

At this point it’s almost imperative that we introduce an aside. For the pejorative reference to “shapes” all but *demand*s our attention. “Shape” is characteristically a troublous word in Coleridgean. Thus, in “Religious Musings,” see “pale Fear / Haunted by ghastlier shapings than surround / Moon-blasted Madness when he yells at midnight.” Likewise, the ominous supernatural specter-bark of “The Ancient Mariner” was “A speck, a mist, a shape.” In “The Pains of Sleep” he refers to “the fiendish crowd / Of shapes and thoughts” that “tortured” him. Many other usages could be adduced here. And though, in “Dejection,” Coleridge explicitly regrets that he has lost his “shaping Spirit of Imagination,” in one of his letters written during the same *annus mirabilis* when the first version of “The Ancient Mariner” and the first part of “Christabel” came into being, he speaks of his body as “diseased and fevered” by his imagination. Nor should we forget the essentially ironic situation underlying “The Eolian Harp,” a poem that begins as an address to his wife, but develops into a vision of beatific universal oneness; whereupon he forgets all about his “pensive Sara,” until he sees her “mild reproof”—and four lines after the appearance of his characteristic word “dim,” he apologizes for “These shapings of the unregenerate mind.”

So much for “shadow,” and its membership in a cluster of terms that include pejorative or problematical connotations of “shape.” “Float” is much less strongly weighted on the “bad” side than “shadow” and “shape.” Things can float either malignly or benignly, as with the Mariner’s boat at different stages in its journey. In Coleridge’s play *Remorse* there is a passage that suggests Shelley’s typical kind of idealistically easygoing boat:

It were a lot divine in some small skiff  
Along some ocean’s boundless solitude  
To float forever with a careless course  
And think myself the only being alive!

Thus in “Religious Musings,” we read of Edenic delights that “float to earth.” But in the same text there are “floating mists of dark idolatry” that “Broke and misshaped the omnipresent Sire.” The poem itself has an



interesting ambiguous usage, where talk of “Moulding Confusion” with “plastic might” (the Greek derivative “plastic” being his consistently “good” word for “shaping”) leads into talk of “bright visions” that “float.” And somewhere in between, there is a letter: “My thoughts are floating about in an almost chaotic state.” So, when in the next stanza you come to the “floating hair,” you are presumably on a ridge that slopes both ways. And the only fairly sure grounds for deciding which way it slopes is given to us on the surface: the accompanying cry, “Beware! Beware!”

We shall consider later the strategic term “midway.” But before leaving it for the present, I'd like to suggest that, as regards Coleridge's poem “Love” (which transforms his troubled courtship of Sara Hutchinson into an allegory of knighthood), I doubt whether, under the modern dispensation, he'd have included the line, “When midway on the mount I lay.”

We now have only the ice to deal with, and we shall have finished our consideration of the ways in which the closing lines of Stanza Two are not just a return to the theme of Stanza One, but a return *with a difference*. And that difference resides *precisely* in the addition of details more in keeping with the countertheme, though ambiguously so (yet not quite so ambiguously, if we read the poem not just as English but as one particular poetic dialect of English, one vatic nomenclature subtly or implicitly different from all others).

Lowes (as might be expected!) turns up some caverns of ice in another text that Coleridge presumably read (even a quite rare kind of ice that waxes and wanes with the phases of the moon). But we still contend that a “source” in that sense is not relevant to our present problem. For we need but assume that the source chose to talk about ice for the same reason that Coleridge incorporated what had been said in the source; namely: because “ice” has a set of “mythic” or “archetypal” connotations which recommend it to a poet's attention. And we are concerned with “derivation” in that “nonhistoric” but poetically “principled” sense.

It is obvious enough what kind of attitude is linked with the iciness of ice in “The Ancient Mariner.” There, ice is purely and simply a horror. And ice is unambiguously unpleasant, insofar as it stands for coldness in the sense that Coleridge had in mind when, in the letter to Southey about his wife's “puny thwarting,” he characterized her as “cold in sympathy.” And we are still to discuss Coleridge's play, *Remorse*, where “fingers of ice” are located in a “chasm” within a “cavern.” (Here the sound of water dropping in the darkness is likened to “puny thwartings.”) But regardless of what ominous implications may lurk in the ice, on its face the reference is euphoric.

We are now ready for the windup. In terms of the Hegelian pattern, we should expect the final stanza (a kind of poem-within-a-poem) to “synthesize” the two movements that have gone before. It does so. For the vision of the “Abyssinian maid” is clearly *beatific*, yet the beholder of the vision (as presented in terms of the poem) is also to be identified with *sinister* connotations (as with those that explicitly emerge just after a recurrent reference to the “caves of ice”). I refer to the cry, “Beware! Beware!”—and to the development that transforms malignly the principle of encirclement (introduced benignly in Stanza One).

As for the fact that the maid in the vision is said to be “Abyssinian”: Derive her as you will along the lines of sources in other books, there's still a tonal likelihood that the lady is “Abyssinian” because, among other things, as so designated she contains within this name for her essence the syllables that spell “abyss.” And there, roundabout, would be the “chasm,” euphorically transmuted for the last phase.

As for “Mount Abora”: Regardless of its possible derivation from other texts (as Lowes suggests), in accordance with theories of “musicality in verse” that I have discussed elsewhere (in connection with Coleridge, an essay reprinted in my book, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*), I would lay great stress upon the fact that *m* and *b* are close tonal cognates, hence these vocables come very close to “Singing of Mount Amora,” which is understandable enough.

As for the lines, “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song”: I see in them the euphorically tinged adumbration of the outcry that was to turn up, in “Dejection,” only a few years later.

For some reason that it's hard to be clear about, though in a letter Coleridge admonished his son Hartley “not to speak so loud,” again and again he applies this epithet to music (even to the bassoon, in “The Ancient Mariner,” though that instrument cannot be loud, so far as sheer decibels go). All I can offer, along these lines, is the possibility of a submerged pun, as indicated by an early poem in which Coleridge speaks of “loud, lewd Mirth.” Might “loud” *deflectively* connote “lewd,” in the depths of the Coleridgean nomenclature? I won't assert so, but there does seem to be the possibility (though it would be a tough one to prove, even if it were absolutely true). In the meantime, we must simply await further advices.

The cavern scenes in Act IV of *Remorse* might well be mentioned in greater detail, since they help so greatly to reveal the sinister possibilities lurking beneath the surface of the terms in “Kubla Khan.” Seen in a dream, the cave is “haunted,” the villain appearing to his victim in “a thousand fearful shapes.” There is a morbid dalliance with “shadows.” The threat implicit in the very idea of a chasm is brought out explicitly by the nature of the plot, as the villain hurls his victim “down the chasm.” (Chasms, that is, are implicitly a kind of gerundive, a to-be-bewared-of, a to-be-hurled-into). And where as we are told that the “romantic chasm” of the euphoric poem “slanted / Down,” these apparently innocuous words are seen to have contained, about their edges, malign connotations; for in the victim's premonitory dream of his destruction in *Remorse*, we learn that his foot hung “aslant adown” the edge. At the end of the act, the woman who is to be the *avenger* announces, “The moon hath moved in Heaven, and I am here,” (a remarkable transformation of the prime motivating line in “The Ancient Mariner”: “The moving Moon went up the sky”). At the start of the last act, the circle appears at its worst: “Circled with evil.” (A previous reference to a threatening circle of people surrounding the villain had appeared in the stage directions.) A reference to the “fascination” in the eye of the hero (whom the loving heroine calls “stately”) marks the spot from which I would derive the term, “Fascination Poems” as an alternative to “Mystery Poems.”

In the light of our analysis, it should be easy to understand why, in the closing poem-within-a-poem, the references to the poet (who is ambiguously one with both the dream and the dreamer) should be so surrounded with connotations of admonition. Yet the poem is essentially euphoric. Hence, even though we are told to *beware*, and to view with *holy dread* (or rather, to deflect-our-eyes-from) the poet who both is this marvel and has conceived it, we end on *Paradise*.

Returning now to a point we postponed when considering “midway on the waves,” should we not take into consideration the fact that in the *middle stanza* the notion appears not once but four times: The other explicit places are: “Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst”; “And 'mid these dancing rocks”; “And 'mid this tumult”—while a strong trace of the pattern is also observable in “half-intermitted” and “the mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves.” (I take it that “measure,” in contrast with “measureless,” includes connotations of poetic measure.)

At the risk of being charged with oversubtlety, I'd propose to view that design (a kind of *spatial fixity* in these many motions and actions and action-like motion) as a matter of basic significance. As regards the underlying principle of the poem (its essence or character as a *unity*) these conflicting elements (the beatific and the sinister) are but what we might Spinozistically call two attributes of a common substance. Thus, in the last analysis, the stages of its unfolding melt into a simultaneity, a nodus of motivation that stands “midway” between the extremes. (A stanza of “Religious Musings” where Saints “sweep athwart” the poet's “gaze,” develops into agitation thus: “For who of woman born may paint the hour, / When seized in his mid course, the Sun shall wane / Making noon ghastly!” I'd hardly dare press the point; but we might at least recall that the midday sun transfixed the Mariner's boat, and Christabel's troubles took place at midnight. And anyone who is concerned with the strange magic of reversal, as in formulas like “Ave Eva,” might also pause to note however uneasily that, quite as Cummings in “God” saw “dog spelled backwards,” so “mid” is but a chiasmic

form of Coleridge's ubiquitous "dim.")

However, even if there is a sense in which the generating principle represented by this poem's action is itself as much an unmoved mover as Aristotle's God (with even an analogue of "negative theology" in "sunless," "lifeless," "measureless," and "ceaseless"), there is also the fact that, as "broken down" into a quasi-temporal sequence, the translation of this essential unity into a series of successive revelations (or tiny "apocalypses") can *begin* with a reference to an Edenic garden, and *end* on the word "Paradise." In this sense, despite the intrinsic immobility of the poem's organizing principle (a "midway" situation that found more explicit dissociative expression in "The Ancient Mariner," both in the figure of the motionless boat, and in the specter, "The Night-mare Life-in-Death"); despite the fact that while the narrative relation between rising fountain and sinking river goes on "turning," the *principle* behind the unfolding is "forever still"; despite these ups and downs en route, the poem as a whole can be called "euphoric."

We are now ready to take up the problem that arises from our insistence upon calling the poem *finished* whereas the author himself called it a "fragment." Here I can best make my point by quoting a passage from my *Philosophy of Literary Form*:

Imagine an author who had laid out a five-act drama of the rational, intricate, intrigue sort—a situation that was wound up at the start, and was to be unwound, step by step, though the five successive acts. Imagine that this plot was scheduled, in Act V, to culminate in a scene of battle. Dramatic consistency would require the playwright to "foreshadow" this battle. Hence, in Act III, he might give us the battle incipiently, or implicitly, in a vigorous battle of words between the antagonists. But since there was much business still to be transacted, in unwinding the plot to its conclusion he would treat Act III as a mere foreshadowing of Act V, and would proceed with his composition until the promises emergent in Act III had been fulfilled in Act V.

On the other hand, imagine a "lyric" plot that had reduced the intrigue business to a minimum. When the poet had completed Act III, his job would be ended, and despite his intention to write a work in five acts, he might very well feel a loss of inclination to continue into Acts IV and V. For the act of foreshadowing, in Act III, would already *implicitly contain* the culmination of the promises. The battle of words would itself by the *symbolic equivalent* of the mortal combat scheduled for Act V. Hence, it would *serve as surrogate* for the *quality* with which he had intended to end Act V, whereat the poet would have no good reason to continue further. He would "lose interest"—and precisely because the quality of Act V had been "telescoped" into the quality of Act III that foreshadowed it (and in foreshadowing it, was of the same substance or essence). Act III would be a kind of ejaculation too soon, with the purpose of the composition forthwith dwindling.

Does not this possibility solve our problem? I believe that, in principle at least, Coleridge actually did dream all those lines, and transcribed them somewhat as an amanuensis might have done. For nearly every writer has jotted down a few bits that he woke up with, and there's no reason why someone couldn't wake up with more. And Mozart apparently could conceive of a work all finished before he wrote it down, so that in effect the act of composition was but the translating of a timeless unity (like a painting or piece of sculpture) into a temporal progression (quite as the observer "reads histories" into a static form when he lets his eye wander from place to place across it, thereby "improvising" developments within its parts). And even a long and complex structure which one works out painfully step by step may involve but the progressive "discovery" of implications already present in the "germ" that set him off in the first place. Why had it even struck him as worth working on, if it had not been for him like a knotted bundle of possibilities which he would untie one by one, as the loosening of each knot set the conditions for the loosening of the next (like a psychoanalyst's patient discovering by free association things that he somehow already knew but didn't know he knew)?

But “Kubla Khan” was the kind of poem that Coleridge's own aesthetic theories were not abreast of. His very attempts to distinguish between “Imagination” and “Fancy” at the expense of the latter serve to indicate my point. “Fancy” wouldn't come into its own until the time of Rimbaud, when it would take on dimensions that Coleridge never explicitly attributed to it. For his concept of Fancy got mixed up with purely mechanical doctrines of associationism which he strongly rejected (a kind of resistance that was probably also tied up with his moralistic attempts to resist the compulsive aspects of his addiction to opium, when it became integrated with the fountain of his creativity). In any case, at the very start of his collaboration with Wordsworth in plans for the *Lyrical Ballads*, the kind of job he set himself really involved an ideal of “Fancy” (but not in the partly pejorative sense that the term took on, in the dialectic of his *Biographia Literaria*). And as an integral aspect of such possibilities there would be the kind of imagistic short-circuiting to which I have referred in my quotation from *Philosophy of Literary Form*.

Thus, when one contemporary critic finds that the expression, “ancestral voices prophesying war” is “too pointless,” since “no further use is made of it,” the objection would be like contending that, in Eliot's “Gerontion,” a line such as “By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians” is “pointless” because we learn nothing more about Hakagawa. On the contrary, as I have tried to show, the line does to perfection exactly what it is there for, as a narrative way of stating a motivational essence. Yvor Winters' label, “Reference to a non-existent plot,” to characterize such usages as Eliot's, helps us see that Coleridge's poem was already moving towards a later elliptical manner, at a time when Southey could have turned “Kubla Khan” into a work as long as *The Ring and the Book*. In this sense, the poem was a “fragment.” But it is complete insofar as no further movements are needed (or even possible, without the poem's becoming something else, as when one dream fades into another). The most one can imagine is the addition of a few details that amplify what is already sufficiently there.

All told, the more closely we study the poem in the light of Coleridge's particular nomenclature, the more fully we realize how many of the terms have sinister connotations, as regards their notable use in other contexts. Imagery lends itself well to such shiftiness, and readily transcends the law of excluded middle. In fact, such susceptibility doubtless accounts for much of its appeal, since it can so spontaneously bridge the gulfs of dispute, and can simultaneously confess and be reticent. In line with contemporary interests, one might note that Coleridge explicitly equates the image of the fountain with the principle of what would not be called “creativity.” On this point, in addition to references already cited, we might recall in his preface to “Christabel,” his objections to “a set of critics ... who have no notion that there are such things as fountains in the world, small as well as great.” At another place he distinguishes between “Springs” and “tanks” (“two Kinds of Heads in the world of literature”). Elsewhere, when on the subject of “knowing” and “being,” he sums up by thoughts on “the common fountainhead of both, the mysterious source whose being is knowledge, whose knowledge is being—the adorable I Am In That I Am.” In *Anima Poetae* he writes: “Nota bene to make a detailed comparison, in the manner of Jeremy Taylor, between the searching for the first cause of a thing and the seeking the fountains of the Nile—so many streams, each with its particular fountains—and, at last, it all comes to a name.” Another note beautifully illustrates how the image takes on other connotations of delight: “Some wilderness-plot—green & fountainous & unviolated by Man.” But “creativity” also has its risks. And whether or not you would agree that the “problematic” element was heightened in Coleridge's case by the interweaving of the Mystery Poems with the early stages of opium addiction, it still remains a fact that in “Kubla Khan” as enacted in detail, the principle of inspiration is simultaneously welcomed and feared (a secular attitude properly analogous to the theologians' doubts whether a vision of the divine is truly from God or from the Devil in disguise).

## Criticism: Charles I. Patterson Jr. (essay date 1974)

SOURCE: Patterson, Charles I., Jr. “The Daemonic in ‘Kubla Khan’: Toward Interpretation.” *PMLA* 89, no. 5 (October 1974): 1033-42.

[In the following essay, Patterson concentrates on the “daemonic” element in “Kubla Khan,” linking the work with a Platonic view of the inspired or “possessed” poet, which the critic contends is central to an interpretation of the poem.]

As is well known, there are strong differences of opinion concerning both what Coleridge's “Kubla Khan” expresses as a whole and the symbolic import of major elements within the poem. Perhaps no other poem of the time, not even Keats's *Lamia*, has evoked more widely diverging views of its meaning. Coleridge designated it a fragment in his prefatory statement, but critics differ just as frequently on whether or not it *is* a fragment as they do concerning its interpretation. Psychological analyses of it have often ranged far afield from what the text will adequately support; and psychiatrists, who have taken up the poem as the basis for psychoanalyzing its author, have added further to the conflicting views of its import. In recent years, however, interpretations have revealed tendencies toward unanimity on the symbolical significance of some of the elements within the poem. It is rather widely accepted now that the fountain, chasm, and river in some way suggest the human consciousness, especially that of a poet.<sup>1</sup> By many critics the “pleasure dome” is held to represent poetry, or the pleasure provided by poetry, the immediate purpose of which Coleridge said was to give pleasure.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the building of this “pleasure dome” is considered to be analogous in some way to the imaginative process of creating poetry.<sup>3</sup>

These are undoubtedly steps in a fruitful direction, but interpreters seem largely to have ignored the different kinds of poems and different processes of the imagination by which they are created, the different aims to which imagination can be directed with differing results. It is the purpose of this essay to suggest that “Kubla Khan” is a poem about a particular kind of poetry which may be properly designated daemonic poetry, and also to suggest that the delineation of the nature of daemonic poetry and its effects upon people is more nearly central in the poem than what it reveals about the process of its creation, for the main purpose of the process, and of the more detailed inspiration, is to help to indicate the characteristics and effects of this kind of poetry. The famous passage about “Woman wailing for her Daemon<sup>4</sup> Lover,” that is, supramortal lover, is deeply functional and pertinent as well as richly descriptive and atmospheric. Early in the poem this passage points toward the ending and helps to provide a clue to what the whole may express:

A savage Place, as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning Moon was haunted  
By Woman wailing for her Daemon Lover: (5)

There is no necessity to consider this lover Satanic, and there are good reasons not to do so, contrary to the case in some versions of the popular ballad entitled “James Harris,” also called “The Daemon Lover,” which Coleridge most likely had read. Clarification of the particular daemonic nature of the whole poem will, I believe, unlock some of the mysteries of its wide appeal and contribute something toward an acceptable interpretation of the baffling piece.

In several recent studies of the poem there are elements that point strongly toward such an interpretation. For example, Bernard Breyer, in a sprightly and provocative essay, has asserted that “in the theory of art adumbrated in Xanadu, Coleridge is flirting dangerously with ... the ‘demonic’” and that this theory of art is “amoral.” However, Breyer does not clarify the concept of the daemonic involved but merely raises the question whether “the dome in air and the dome in Xanadu ... are evil in essence,” impelling Coleridge to draw back from them at the end.<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Mercer, though likening the Abyssinian maid (“the damsel with a dulcimer”) in part to Jacob Boehme's heavenly Virgin, recognizes vaguely that Coleridge is piercing beyond good and evil, that the aim of the poem is to convey a “trance-like excitement” which he had experienced and in which “meaning in its ordinary usage does not enter,” but she maintains that the poetic consciousness represented in the poem is “redemptory” because “paradisaical” and that the daemon lover is evil.<sup>7</sup> With both of these readings I disagree. Elisabeth Schneider, in her admirably thorough study, points out Coleridge's debt to Plato's conception of the inspired “possessed” poet, but she does not draw out its full import for explication

and does not bring in Plato's conception of non-malicious daemons living in bliss outside human limitations as emblematic of what human beings both desire and fear and of what the "possessed" poet can occasionally bring. Hence, Schneider does not formulate the interpretation I offer, though she points in that direction when she concludes that "the spirit of the poem ... is cool and rather nonhuman," that the poet speaking "is dehumanized behind his mask of hair and eyes and magic circle."<sup>8</sup> The poet is indeed removed from the customary human state when at the end he suggests the supramortal beauty of the "poem-dome" which he says he would build "of air" if he could regain the inspiration. Kathleen Coburn, discussing the pertinence of a paradisaal conception in Michael Psellus, cogently indicates that the poetic paradise in "Kubla Khan" is "nostalgic and dangerous" and quotes Psellus' designation of the Chaldean paradise as "not that which the book of Moses describes" and his observation that to persons who "approach it unworthily ... it is shut, for they are not capable of its felicity,"<sup>9</sup> precisely the condition of the listeners at the end of "Kubla Khan" before that somewhat similar paradise called up by the incantation of the poet.

Humphry House views the work as "a poem about the act of poetic creation," about the ecstasy in imaginative fulfillment; and he designates it a "triumphant positive statement of the positive potentialities of poetry" in which pleasure and sacredness are fused and in which the poet who achieved this fusion is held to be "a holy or sacred person, a seer acquainted with the undivided life" (pp. 115-19). There is indeed in the poem a suggestion of the "undivided" life free from the esthetic limitations of the present; but I do not think that there is anything in the poem that is holy or sacred in the usual sense—only in a pre-Christian or non-Christian context that gives these words quite different meanings from those now prevalent. A close look at passages on the nature of poets in Plato's dialogues will help to clarify matters here, and Plato's skepticism, at times hostility, toward poets should not be forgotten. In *Phaedrus* Plato defines the state of effective poetic creation as "a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention" presided over by Dionysus at times rather than by Apollo (also at times by Aphrodite, Eros, and the Muses),<sup>10</sup> and in *Ion* he discusses the point more specifically:

For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Corybantian revellers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and metre they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right mind. And the soul of the lyric poet does the same, as they themselves say; for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains. ... For the poet is a light and winged and *holy* thing. ... The poets are only the interpreters of the Gods by whom they are severally possessed.<sup>11</sup>

This "possessed" state implies a self-obliterating empathy, when the subject of his song takes control of a poet's mind and he calls up, by "music and metre," a beauty untrammelled by the demands of the rational and analytical, which are bypassed or eluded in the process. Plato is, in effect, using the metaphor of his day to discuss this process. Coleridge's understanding of empathy interlaces his critical writing, and his knowledge of Plato appears so frequently as to leave little doubt that he had seen this passage about "possessed" poets.<sup>12</sup> It helps to clarify the end of the poem, including the references to "honey dew" and "milk of paradise," as well as the sense in which the poet in "Kubla Khan" is said to be "holy" and the river, which suggests the poetic consciousness, is called "sacred"—i.e., given over to and seemingly possessed by a god presenting through the poet's *furor divinus* a vision of beauty not necessarily related to the good and the true, for the anthropomorphic deities (especially Dionysus, Eros, and Aphrodite) often dealt in neither when they drove mortals into frenzy and "out of their right mind." Humphry House rightly designates the paradise at the end of "Kubla Khan" neither Eden nor the home of the blessed and denies that it is a false paradise (pp. 120-22). He proclaims the poem "a vision of the ideal human life as the poetic imagination can create it" and says that it deserves the "ritual dread" expressed at the end, but he does not elucidate the cause or the nature of this dread or what in this poetic vision would impel such a response in people who see it. A vision of ideal human life

should certainly not impel such terror but should be more tranquilizing and spiritualizing even while stimulating great longing. I strongly doubt that there is anything at all ideal in the poem unless the extreme of the esthetic alone, the Dionysian frenzy rather than the Apollonian vision, may justly be called ideal, which would then have to be designated the ideal of the pure esthetic only, that is, the esthetic divorced from the ethical, spiritual, and social. The poem does indeed convey a vision of an experience of this kind, I think.

Humphry House maintains that “the pivot of all interpretations” is in the lines

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 of Air. (13)

(ll. 42-46)

This passage is indeed pivotal, but it is not central and focal. It is the beginning of two all-important transitions: first, the transition *from* the actual physical dome of “rare device” built by the worldly power of Kubla *to* the nonmaterial pleasure dome that would be built “of air” so vividly by the poet’s incantation, his “music loud and long,” that “all who heard” would see it standing before them, the dome built by Kubla serving as a visible stepping-stone to the dome to be built by the poet; and, second, the transition *from* emphasis on the process of poetic creation (“Could I revive ... such a deep Delight ... I would build ...”) *to* emphasis on the end product that results from that process, for the second dome to be built by the poet—not the first built by Kubla—is this crucial final product, toward which Kubla’s dome is made to point and upon which the whole poem centers. “Such a deep Delight” in the full context is surely a daemonic inspiration, an unrestricted and amoral joy like that of the pre-Christian daemons, for that “Delight” derives from the “Abyssinian maid”<sup>14</sup> with a dulcimer singing of “Mount Amara” (in the manuscript), which was a well-known amoral paradise in ancient times. Because the two domes are related as they are in the poem, this second dome to be built by the poet will have to be a focal point in interpretation, for the startling affirmation at the end concerns *it*, and not Kubla’s dome, emphasis having been largely transferred by that time to the chanting poet’s dome. Concerning it interpretations have not said enough. Although little is said directly about it in the poem, we can infer a great deal about it from its vivid effects upon its beholders at the end. The real purpose of Kubla’s dome in the whole is to serve as a *partial* objective correlative to the conceived dome in the mind of the poet—*partial* because the latter is made significantly different from the former at the end.

Again, the lines quoted above by House are indeed pivotal, but they are not focal. The crux of interpretation lies in the terminal lines immediately following, for these last lines (48-54) reveal the nucleus around which the whole poem revolves—that is, the nature and effects upon beholders of the pleasure dome which the poet would build by incantation if he could recover his once-held inspiration derived from the “Abyssinian maid” and her song. These lines indicate a startlingly different effect upon hearers from that which normally would be expected of persons experiencing great and unusual beauty, for they would ordinarily exclaim something like, “Oh! How beautiful! How marvelous! How dazzling!” But what the speaker foresees that they would say if he were to rear his incantatory pleasure palace before them, with its marvelous fusion of “sunny” dome and “caves of ice,” is indeed a surprise; in fact, the response is nothing less than a shocker, and it puts a different perspective upon all that has gone before:

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,  
And close your Eyes in holy Dread,  
For He on Honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the Milk of Paradise.

The “flashing Eyes” and “floating Hair” suggest that he is one of Plato's “possessed” and Dionysus-inspired poets proclaiming that all who heard his incantation and consequently saw the glimmering vision called up by it would respond overwhelmingly to its fearfulness rather than to its beauty, for its beauty is that which can be created only by a poet who has had a glimpse beyond man's mortal limitations into the ultimate esthetic, such as the nonmalicious daemons of the early world supposedly enjoyed—the terrifying beauty that makes all earthly beauty pale into insignificance by comparison.<sup>15</sup> This, I think, is what frightens his hearers back, evokes in them the “holy Dread,” which is certainly not reverence, and impels them to call for the performance of rites customarily used against sorcerers and evil spirits. However, this daemonic beauty is not intrinsically evil, but very powerful, so powerful as to “make a man forget his mortal way,” as Keats said, and hence is fraught with peril.<sup>16</sup> Plato's dialogues again clarify matters, for they often refer to a far-off happy time when daemonic joy was brought to man by pre-Christian daemons who were neither good nor evil but simply outside the pale of human restrictions and limitations, where joy and beauty could be boundless.<sup>17</sup> This daemonic realm may be taken to indicate the kind of experience that the “possessed” poet, carried out of himself in a fine frenzy, was able to convey, for he was impelled into a state of mind in which mortal limitations fall away:

Blessed and spontaneous life does not belong to the present cycle, of the world, but to the previous one, in which God superintended the whole revolution of the universe; and the several parts of the universe were distributed under the rule of certain inferior deities ... and each one was in all respects sufficient for those of whom he was the shepherd ... and I might tell of ten thousand other blessings, which belong to that dispensation.

There is a tradition of the happy life of mankind in days when all things were spontaneous and abundant. And of this the reason is said to have been as follows: ... God, in his love of mankind, placed over us the demons, who are a superior race, and they with great ease and pleasure to themselves, and no less to us, taking care of us ... made the tribes of men happy and united.<sup>18</sup>

As J. L. Lowes pointed out, Coleridge well knew that “a *daemon* and a *demon* are not one and the same thing,”<sup>19</sup> and there is evidence, if indeed evidence is needed, of Coleridge's knowledge of these nonmalicious Platonic daemons and their neo-Platonic descendants. One of them is a major functionary (the tutelary spirit of the deep, who loved the albatross) in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and two of his “fellow-daemons” speak of the mariner's penance (ll. 395-409), as is indicated in the marginal gloss<sup>20</sup> (where Coleridge's knowledge of “daemons of earth or middle air” is unmistakable) and anticipated in the prefatory epigraph which Coleridge quoted from Thomas Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae*.<sup>21</sup> In “Kubla Khan,” written possibly in October 1797<sup>22</sup> before “The Ancient Mariner” was completed (though already in progress), Coleridge seems to be making another use of this concept of the daemonic together with Plato's conception of the frenzied poet possessed and carried out of himself by a god other than Apollo (by Dionysus, Eros, or Aphrodite) and therefore able to convey a supreme ecstasy, such as the primordial daemons supposedly experienced. In the passage above, Plato designated these daemons “inferior deities,” and they are frequently called “lesser deities” or “fallen deities,” in daemonology. Thus, “possession” by god or daemon today indicates more relentless preoccupation with something than is usual for a mortal, making him seem “like a daemon,” a free spirit, in intensity; “daemonic” may denote the unrestrained beauty tinged with terror in *what* such a person perceives—esthetically paradisaical but with neither spiritual nor ethical implications, for human limitations did not restrain the gods or the daemons. They and their daemonic world now serve as a metaphor for the fierce desire of the human consciousness for rare, remote, uninhibited beauty and joy. The poet speaking in “Kubla Khan” reveals at the end an awareness that his hearers, in this esthetically shrunken and hence esthetically fallen modern era, would be overcome by the fearfulness of his daemonic pleasure dome built “of air” and would therefore confuse it with the Satanic, consider it evil, cry out warnings (“Beware!



Beware!"), and call for rites to exorcise the evil spirit supposedly within him (i.e., "Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your Eyes with holy Dread"). "Holy Dread" rather than reverence is an expected response by the laity to the renditions of the possessed poet in his frenzy; as Coleridge said, in one of his notebooks concerning such a poet's *furor divinus*, "Only the Regenerate can appreciate it" (see n. 13). The chanting poet's rapt attitude, "flashing Eyes," and "floating Hair" (traditional marks of the daemonically inspired poet) are Coleridge's means of conveying to readers the daemonic nature of this "possessed" poet's dome "of air," which he suggests would far surpass the physical dome "of rare device" built by Kubla. Kubla's dome is supposed to be the ultimately beautiful object within human bounds; the poet's dome suggested at the end is beyond human bounds, completely free of all that restrains, restricts, limits, and encloses—one reason why it inspires terror and frightens the laity back.

But Coleridge was not one of the laity where the daemonic is concerned. Just at the time when he was writing "Kubla Khan" his letters and notebooks repeatedly show him longing for the boundless and unrestricted beyond the limitations of mankind. In a letter to John Thelwall on 14 October 1797 (the month in which the poem was probably composed), Coleridge wrote something that suggests the kind of scenery in "Kubla Khan" and the state of mind associated with it in the poem:

*All things appear little. ... My mind feels as if it ached to behold and know something great—something one & indivisible—and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!—But in this faith all things counterfeit infinity!*

(*Collected Letters*, I, 349)

In a letter to George Coleridge on 10 March 1798, Coleridge wrote of a similar longing for a state of detachment from the small and the human: "How divine that repose is ... a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountains, & flowers & trees, in the heart of a waste of sands" (*Collected Letters*, I, 394). The same idea appears in a notebook entry phrased in such a way as to point even more strongly toward a desire for that which is remote from the limitations of the human sphere: "Some wilderness—plot, green & fountainous & unviolated by Man."<sup>23</sup> Romantic writers frequently depict external nature as in some way emblematic of mind. All these utterances indicate a concern for certain kinds of scenery as symbolical of the mind's quest for experience beyond mortal restrictions, and Coleridge later included the realization of potentialities within the mind's own depths:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy windowpane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phaenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature / It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is he Creator and the Evolver!<sup>24</sup>

Here are statements in Coleridge's own words that seem to explain what is going on in "Kubla Khan" at its deepest level: in describing the palace and grounds of the Khan, Coleridge is seeking "objects of Nature" that would serve as "a symbolical language for something within" him "that already and forever exists," "a forgotten or hidden Truth" of his inner Nature—that is, the archetypal pattern there for pleasure beyond the confines of mortality, which lies at the heart of man's daemonic proclivity. A "possessed" poet can convey such pleasure briefly by creating a song that suggests it.

In a passage in his autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Part IV (published in 1833), Goethe clarifies this concept and acknowledges that he gave it the designation daemonic "after the example of the ancients," that is, of Plato and others. Goethe is using the third person to speak of himself as a youth:

He believed he could detect in nature—both animate and inanimate, spiritual and non-spiritual—something which reveals itself only in contradictions, and which, therefore, could not be encompassed under any concept, still less under a word. It was not divine, for it seemed without reason; not human, for it had no understanding; not diabolical, for it was beneficent; not angelic, for it took pleasure in mischief. It resembled chance, in that it manifested no consequence; it was like Providence; for it pointed toward connection. All that restricts us seemed for it penetrable; it seemed to deal arbitrarily with the necessary elements of our existence; it contracted time and expanded space. It seemed to find pleasure only in the impossible and to reject the possible with contempt.

To this entity, which seemed to intervene between all others, to separate them and yet to link them together, I gave the name daemonic, after the example of the ancients and of those who had perceived something similar. I tried to shield myself from this fearful entity by seeking refuge, in accordance with my usual habit behind an imaginary representation. ...

Although this daemonic element can manifest itself in all corporeal and incorporeal things, can even manifest itself most markedly in animals, yet with man especially has it a most wonderful connection that creates a power which while not opposed to the moral order of the world still does so often cross through it that one may be considered the warp and the other the woof. ...

However, the daemonic appears most fearful when it becomes predominant in a human being. During my life I have observed several. ... They are not always the most eminent men either in their intellect or their talents ... but a tremendous power seems to flow from them; and they exercise a wonderful power over all creatures, and even over the elements; and who can say how far such influence may extend? All the combined forces of convention are helpless against them.<sup>25</sup>

The poet intoning “Kubla Khan” seems to possess (or tries to possess) the kind of power described here, and his incantation seems increasingly to reflect what Goethe terms “this fearful entity ... this daemonic element” which in man “creates a power which while not opposed to the moral order of the world still does so often cross through it.” The total structure of the poem moves steadily toward an extreme of esthetic experience of marked intensity and daemonic amorality upon which the whole is focused and with which it concludes, the chanting poet having terrified his fascinated but still resisting listeners. There is no sustained or comprehensive view of life in the poem at all, and nothing that can be called *ideal* in a spiritual or religious sense. It is a vision of beauty and joy that is divorced from the moral, spiritual, social, and ethical.<sup>26</sup>

From the point of view of all this, the “sacred river” as symbol of the poetic mind delineated in the poem appears even more strikingly appropriate, for this particular river strongly suggests the degree to which the subconscious is producer of the strange beauty conveyed in “Kubla Khan” and the degree to which this daemon-beset subconscious is both creator (putting upon experience a different order from the usual) and destroyer (quickly shattering that order and unable to sustain it). Specifically, the river rises in the fountain “with ceaseless turmoil” and flows through the “deep romantic Chasm” called “a savage Place ... holy and enchanted,” such as where woman would wail for a “Daemon Lover,” one superior to a mortal lover—all suggesting uninhibited aspects of the daemonic mind pressing beyond human limitations. The chanting poet, parallel to her, is wailing for his daemonic inspiration to return. In this context *savage* implies not the brutal but the primordial, the time before man's consciousness had evolved the dualism of good and evil and was therefore spontaneous and free, as man can dimly perceive at times in the depths of his subconscious, where the embers of that freedom still reside. Moreover, the pleasure palace was built where this river flows through “Caverns measureless to Man,” that is, built near to and by means of the vast subconscious, holding what De Quincey called “eternities below all life” which throw reflections at times upon “the mirrors of that *camera*

*obscura*—the sleeping mind.”<sup>27</sup> Such is the commerce of our consciousness with the springs of the daemonic in our subconscious. Both Coleridge and De Quincey here, as elsewhere, have come close to Jung's concept of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, though without his term for it. This “sacred river,” which dominates the first thirty-six lines of the poem, while running through “Caverns measureless,” finally flows down to a “sunless Sea” and sinks “in tumult” into a “lifeless Ocean.” This whole concatenation is an effective way of symbolizing that the glittering structures which well up from the subconscious and are recognized by the conscious then sink again into the recesses of the subconscious, where they disintegrate and become “lifeless,” that is, untouched by the conscious intelligence, until they well up into the conscious again, *if they ever do*, and can be given life again. What finally happens to the “sacred river,” which reflected Kubla's pleasure dome “midway on the Wave,” precisely symbolizes what happens to the poet's incantatory dome, which once welled up sufficiently within his conscious for its glory to be known, and then sank again into the “lifeless Ocean” of the deep unconscious beyond recall by the will.

As has been mentioned, Coleridge proclaimed that the immediate purpose of poetry is to give pleasure, but too much is made of this statement alone without reference to other pertinent utterances; for Coleridge went on to assert repeatedly that poetry and the poetic imagination serve as mediators between man and his world and therefore do indeed give truths of the highest kind—the truths of man's spiritual nature and the startling degree to which man's life is and must be moral—as his “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” his major odes, several other poems, and much of his prose fully reveal. In fact, Coleridge maintained that in the highest sense poetry is essentially ideal and that it “brings the whole soul of man into activity,”<sup>28</sup> as “Kubla Khan” does not do, since it is tightly focused on the esthetic alone. Accepting the poem as daemonic, we can believe that “moral” Coleridge was neither dabbling in evil nor presenting a spurious ideal, for the daemonic involves neither of these.

In the final analysis what is presented in “Kubla Khan” is decidedly not in the main line of Coleridge's poetry but is not entirely out of his range either. One can easily understand why the full mind of Coleridge, as revealed in all his other work, brought this poem to its close in just this particular way, whether consciously or subconsciously. It had called up before the mind's eye a vision of the terrible supramortal beauty that would blot out every other consideration, destroy the balance of faculties within the total mind, make man oblivious to spiritual and moral necessities, and hence destroy his taste for the beauty of his world and his adjustment to that world. Neither the religious and moral side of Coleridge *nor* the Coleridge who affirmed the unifying, synthesizing, balance-giving, truth-perceiving power of the imaginative mind could seriously advocate the creating of poetry that would bring such dire results; but the pleasure-seeking, opium taking side of Coleridge could certainly *toy* with the idea of creating it *up to a point*—the point at which his moral, spiritual, and metaphysical side would call into question the wisdom of the endeavor and the extent of its opposition to the main tenets of his literary theory considered in its entirety. He stopped at just this point, terminated the poem in a way that would not collide with his conception of literature and its major purposes, designated it a fragment, and published it “rather as a psychological curiosity than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits.”<sup>29</sup> It is quite possible that having the hypothetical listeners respond so negatively to the incantation was intended, in part, to allow its glimmering beauty to stand in all its splendor and yet simultaneously to bring the overall effect of the whole poem more nearly within the scope of Coleridge's moral conception of literature, for these listeners are not corrupted or harmed by the daemonic incantation even while attesting to its appeal by their fear.

Nevertheless, readers ever since have insistently found “poetic merits” in “Kubla Khan,” perhaps too many, and have treated it more nearly as a completed whole than as a fragment when explicating it, whatever they have designated it. The reasons are not far to seek. Considered in its daemonic aspects, it can hardly be deemed a fragment. As the subtitle promises, it presents “A Vision in a Dream,” and this vision is completed and rounded out—a rapt poet's vision of (1) a marvelous poem, like unto a magnificent dome, which he says he would chant if he could regain the inspiration; and (2) the terror-impelling effects of this second dome upon prospective listeners who experience what his incantation would produce before the mind's eye. Such a

vision can hardly be expressed directly; it can only be conveyed by image, symbol, and innuendo just as is done in the poem as it stands. And a signal element of the completeness of the piece is that, as the whole is progressively built up to its surprise ending, it does to some extent succeed in vividly suggesting the aura of the intended incantatory poem. This much, very likely, is all that would ever be possible in such an endeavor—to convey this glimmering ultra beauty by a carefully wrought matrix of suggestion. The poet's stating that he has its splendid totality potentially in mind, is, like all the rest (the description of Kubla's dome and gardens, the transition to the speaker's poem dome, and thence to its effects upon listeners), merely part of the means by which Coleridge enables the totality of the whole to suggest the marvelous thing he claims to have envisioned. Transferring such a thing to the minds of readers can be only partially successful at best. Still, as "Kubla Khan" develops into what it actually is from beginning to end, it largely *becomes* that which it promises; it largely *becomes* the kind of poem that the poet speaking therein is talking about, an example of what it attempts to convey—a late reconstruction of a Dionysian, "possessed" poet's daemonic poem of beauty beyond the pale of mortality, such as existed at least in conception in ancient times. Hence, its last lines fittingly sound a note of finality and conclusiveness as if nothing else is expected to follow or could follow.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, efforts to get at the meaning and import of the poem have come a long way since the time nearly a hundred years ago (in 1887) when Brandl designated it "a splendid curiosity, a lyrical landscape fairy tale which we know not what to make of."<sup>31</sup> There are still unplumbed depths in its "Caverns measureless," but several interpretations have emerged which in various ways point in the same direction. There seems to be a tendency toward finding in the poem what can be formulated by putting together Plato's conception of a realm of nonmalicious, daemonic creatures dwelling in unrestricted joy outside the pale of human limitation and Plato's well-known conception of the Dionysus-inspired, possessed poet carried out of himself in a *furor divinus*, as the agent who can at times in an incantatory poem call up before men the enchanting, engulfing, and terrifying beauty of this primordial daemon world. If this is in truth what the poem centers upon, then it can hardly be said to express something ideal, spiritual, or philosophical in the traditional sense of these terms.<sup>32</sup> Viewing the poem in this way, as there seem to be sound reasons for doing, we might be able to take a significant step toward achieving an interpretation that would be more widely tenable than before, for we could at least relinquish the search for satisfactory spiritual or philosophic exegeses of the baffling piece. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that a more generally acceptable interpretation may be in process of emerging. If interpretations that stress the daemonic aspects of the poem are on the right track, it may become recognized as the tiny beginning point of that variously handled amoral esthetic that reappeared in Keats and Emily Brontë, led on to Swinburne and Pater, and then came to its eclipse in England in the work of Oscar Wilde and his coterie at the very end of the century.

## Notes

1. E.g., Bernard R. Breyer, "Towards an Interpretation of *Kubla Khan*," *English Studies in Honor of James Southall Wilson*, Univ. of Virginia Studies, 4 (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1951), 277-90; Humphry House, *Coleridge* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), pp. 115-16; Marshall Suther, *Visions of Xanadu* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), p. 222 et passim; S. K. Heninger, "A Jungian Reading of *Kubla Khan*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 18 (1960), 358-67; John Shelton, "The Autograph Manuscript of *Kubla Khan* and an Interpretation," *Review of English Literature*, 7 (Jan. 1966), 32-42. The manuscript was discovered in 1934 (*Times Literary Supplement*, 2 Aug. 1934, p. 541).
2. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907), II, 10. Edward E. Bostetter cogently discusses the biographical significance of the poem in *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963), pp. 84-96.
3. Interestingly enough, the Khan is said to have dreamed of his dome and then built it, just as Coleridge dreamed of a poem concerning it and then tried to construct the poem (Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simmons, Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1964, p. 16).

4. This was Coleridge's original spelling of the word, as shown in the autograph manuscript (Shelton, p. 32), which indicates only two stanzas for the whole poem: ll. 1-36 and 37-54. Except where otherwise noted I shall use this manuscript text in the belief that it more readily reflects Coleridge's meaning when he first wrote the poem.
5. From Coleridge's autograph text (ll. 14-16); see n. 4.
6. Beyer, pp. 287, 290. Werner W. Beyer labels the poem "daemonic" but does not work out the implications (*The Enchanted Forest*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 141. J. B. Beer discusses daemonic aspects of the poem at length; but he does not differentiate clearly between Christian and non-Christian concepts, seeing the daemonic too much as the opposite of the angelic, even though he traces elements of the poem to many older mythologies. Also, he presses too strongly for an ethical and philosophical interpretation, I think, thereby obscuring his insight into its daemonic nature (*Coleridge the Visionary*, New York: Crowell-Collier, 1962, pp. 106-290). Geoffrey Yarlott discerns the concentrated estheticism of the poem but presses for an ethical interpretation also (*Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid*, London: Methuen, 1967, pp. 126-54).
7. "The Symbolism of *Kubla Khan*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 12 (1953), 62-65.
8. *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 245-46, 287-88. Schneider thinks that the poet in the poem is saying that he could write "poetry that would be truly immortal" (p. 242) if he could regain his inspiration. I disagree that it would be immortal in the sense of *enduring and true*, and believe that it would be what is more properly called *supramortal*, since it would impel listeners to feel an ecstasy beyond the mortal in its intensity and fearfulness but not in its permanence. *Kubla's* pleasure dome, which suggests the one that the poet wishes to build "of air" by incantation, is rapidly vanishing from the poem; for it is built, then is merely reflected on the waves of the river, and then becomes only a conception to be built "of air" by incantation.
9. Kathleen Coburn, ed., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series 50 (New York: Pantheon, 1957-62), I, nn. to item 191; henceforth cited as *Notebooks*.
10. *Phaedrus* 265a, b. In 1578 Henricus Stephanus (Henri Estienne) published in Paris an edition of Plato in 3 folio volumes with pages divided into 5 parts by letters ([a], b, c, d, e); this paging and lettering are given in the margins of most modern editions as a standard basis of reference, and I have used these numbers and letters for all citations (translations by Jowett).
11. *Ion* 533e-34e. Schneider, pp. 245-46, quotes very nearly the same passage and points out Coleridge's possible debt to it; but she does not press home the significance for interpretation. Coleridge probably read the passage in the Greek, but he evidently knew Thomas Taylor's translations of Plato and his commentaries thereon, popular then. See Kathleen Raine, "Thomas Taylor, Plato and the English Romantic Movement," *Sewanee Review*, 76 (1968), 240, 253. Some of Taylor's commentaries summarize daemonic lore in Plato, e.g., n. 2 on "The First Alcibiades."
12. Shortly before writing *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge ascribes the "fine frenzy" of a "possessed" poet to himself: "You would smile to see my eye rolling up to the ceiling in a lyric fury and on my knee a *Diaper* pinned, to warm" (to John Thelwall, 6 Feb. 1797, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, Oxford: Clarendon, 1956, I, 308; henceforth cited as *Collected Letters*, cf. I, 267). In June 1797 Dorothy Wordsworth wrote to Mary Hutchinson that Coleridge had the "poet's eye in fine frenzy rolling" (*Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, Oxford: Clarendon, 1935, p. 169). Evidently in 1807-08 he wrote in a notebook (partly reflecting Plato's *Phaedrus* 265a, b): "Two kinds of Madness—the *Insania pseudopoetica*, i.e., nonsense conveyed in strange and unusual Language ... and this is Degenerate / the other the *Furor divinus*, in which the mind by infusion of a celestial Health *supra hominis naturam erigitur et in Deum transit*—and this is Surgeneration, which only the Regenerate can properly appreciate" (*Notebooks*, II, item 3,216).
13. The printed text for l. 46 reads, "I would build that dome in air."
14. She may slightly resemble one of Plato's Bacchic maidens who "draw milk and honey," mentioned above; but it should be remembered that in the revised text she was singing of "Mount Abora" (l. 41), the source of which has been long accepted as Milton's "Mount Amara," one of the paradises other

than Eden in his *Paradise Lost* iv.280-81, where Abyssinian kings keep their younger sons in continual sensual indulgences to divert them from attempting rebellion against the crown. The autograph manuscript of *Kubla Khan* (Shelton, pp. 32-33) shows that Coleridge originally wrote "Mount Amara" here. These facts make more meaningful Coleridge's "Abyssinian maid," who was evidently the sister or servant of these princes in their non-spiritual, purely esthetic paradise. Coleridge's use of it as the source of the chanting poet's inspiration in the poem helps to suggest that it is a poem about supranormal esthetic experience, not a poem about something religious or ideal in the philosophic sense. This "Mount Amara-Ahora" has long been accepted as referring to Xanadu (as Shelton says, p. 41). At least we can surmise that the maid was singing of an amoral paradise of pleasure alone, and hence singing of just such a pleasure palace as Xanadu—another strong link between the two main sections of *Kubla Khan*. However, both Coleridge and Milton could have borrowed Amara from *Purchas*—see John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957), p. 285, n. The river in *Kubla Khan* also resembles the river in Eden in *Paradise Lost* (iv.223-50).

15. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* xiv.246, mentions beauty that "hath terror in it."
16. "Lines Written in the Highlands after a Visit to the Burns Country" (1818), *Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 388. The passage reads as follows:

Scanty the hour and few the steps beyond the bourn of care,  
Beyond the sweet and bitter world,—beyond it unaware!  
Scanty the hour and few the steps, because a longer stay  
Would bar return, and make a man forget his mortal way:  
O horrible! ...

(ll. 29-33)

17. Extensive bibliography and discussion of various conceptions of the daemonic appear in Robert Hunter West, *The Invisible World* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1939), and in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribners, 1925). See n. 11 above concerning Thomas Taylor's commentaries on Plato.
18. *Statesman* 271d, e; *Laws IV* 713c, d, e. Cf. *Symposium* 202e-03a, where love is called a daemon or spirit.
19. *The Road to Xanadu* (Boston: Houghton, 1927), pp. 234-36.
20. *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912), pp. 191, 200, 202; hereafter cited as *Poems*. Though added later the gloss and epigraph point up what Coleridge considered the matter of his poem.
21. In lines that Coleridge omitted from the passage that he quoted, *daemonum* are listed as one group of the multifarious invisible creatures discussed in the epigraph (*Notebooks*, i, n. to item 1,000H).
22. Though the date is controversial, I believe with Earl Leslie Griggs and Wylie Sypher that Oct. 1797 is probably correct. See *Collected Letters*, i, 348-52 and n. for summary. See also E. K. Chambers, *Coleridge* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938), pp. 100-03.
23. *Notebooks*, i, item 220, dated by Coburn 1797-98.
24. *Notebooks*, ii, item 2,546. James Gillman, in *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: William Pickering, 1838), i, 311, quoted this as Coleridge's note applicable to his *Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni* (1802), in which the domelike enormity of Mont Blanc is used to suggest the infinite and unbounded in a religious context.
25. *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Vierter Teil, Swanzigstes Buch), ed. Georg Witkowski, in *Goethes Werke*, x (Leipzig: H. Fikentscher, [193?]), 317-19. The translation is essentially mine with some help from that of John Oxenford (New York: John D. Williams, 1882), ii, 321-23, and with helpful suggestions from my colleague Calvin Brown. The German text is as follows:

Er glaubte in der Natur, der belebten und unbelebten, der beseelten und unbeselten, etwas zu entdecken, das sich nur in Widersprüchen manifestierte und deshalb unter keinen Begriff, noch viel weniger unter ein Wort gefasst werden könnte. Es war nicht göttlich, denn es schien unvernünftig; nicht menschlich, denn es hatte keinen Verstand; nicht teuflisch, denn es war wohlthätig; nicht englisch, denn es liess oft Schadenfreude merken. Es glich dem Zufall, denn es bewies kein Folge; es ähnelte der Forseehung, denn es deutete auf Zusammenhang. Alles, was uns begrenzt, schien für dasselbe durchdringbar: es schien mit den notwendigen Elementen unsres Daseins willkürlich zu schalten; es zog die Zeit zusammen und dehnte den Raum aus. Nur im Unmöglichen schien es sich zu gefallen und das Mögliche mit Verachtung von sich zu stossen.

Dieses Wesen, das zwischen alle übrigen hineinzutreten, sie zu sondern, sie zu verbinden schien, nannte ich dämonisch, nach dem Beispiel der Alten und derer, die etwas Ähnliches gewahrt hatten. Ich suchte mich vor diesem furchtbaren Wesen zu retten, indem ich mich nach meiner Gewohnheit hinter ein Bild flüchtete. ...

Obgleich jenes Dämonische sich in allem Körperlichen und Unkörperlichen manifestieren kann, ja bei den Tieren sich aufs merkwürdigste auspricht, so steht es vorzüglich mit dem Menschen im wunderbarsten Zusammenhang und bildet eine der moralischen Weltordnung wo nicht entgegengesetzte, doch sie durchkreuzende Macht, so dass man die eine für den Zettel, die andere für den Einschlag könnte gelten lassen. ...

Am furchtbarsten aber erscheint dieses Dämonische, wenn es in irgend einem Menschen überwiegend hervortritt. Während meines Lebensganges habe ich mehrere ... beobachten können. Es sind nicht immer die vorzüglichsten Menschen, weder an Geist noch an Talenten ... aber eine ungeheure Kraft geht von ihnen aus, und sie üben eine unglaubliche Gewalt über alle Geschöpfe, ja sogar über die Elemente, und wer kann sagen, wie weit sich eine solche Wirkung erstrecken wird? Alle vereinten sittlichen Kräfte vermögen nichts gegen sie.

26. See p. 2 of Breyer where he suggests that it may be evil. I disagree.
27. *Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson, xii (London: A. & C. Black, 1897), 335.
28. *Biographia Literaria* ii.12. See Yarlott, pp. 130-32.
29. As stated in his preface to the poem when first published in 1816 (italics Coleridge's).
30. Though Coleridge left unfinished many projects involving steady application, his imagination revealed a strong instinct for completing what was immediately before it. Once he wrote that late at night, seeing one of three logs in the fireplace totally consumed, he added another log to complete "this perishable architecture" even though he was going to bed at once and would have no further use for the fire; and he continued: "Hence I seem (for I write, not having yet gone to bed) to suspect, that this desire of totalizing, of perfecting, may be the bottom-impulse of many, many actions, in which it never is brought forward as an avowed, or even agnized (*anerkennt*) as a conscious motive" (*Notebooks*, ii, item 2,414; cf. item 2,471; cf. *Anima Poetae*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, London: William Heinemann, 1895, pp. 116-17).
31. Alois Brandl, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the English Romantic School*, English ed. by Lady Eastlake (London: J. Murray, 1887), p. 186.
32. Some help in grasping fully the import of the nonreligious, nonspiritual aspects of *Kubla Khan* is afforded by the realization that at the center of the Khan's purely esthetic garden, which resembles Milton's Eden in *Paradise Lost* and Eden of scripture, stood the dominating palace of ultimate pleasure, while at the center of Eden (*in medio paradisi* in the Vulgate Bible) stood the great Tree of

Life and beside it the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil requiring the preeminence of man's moral striving rather than of pleasure seeking—a striking and pertinent contrast. See *Paradise Lost* iv.131-49, 194-96, 220-22; Genesis ii.9. In Act i of an unfinished play which Coleridge wrote in the autumn of 1800, entitled *The Triumph of Loyalty*, one of the characters exclaims, “Oh! there is Joy above the name of Pleasure. ... / Ah! was that bliss / Fear'd as alien and too vast for man?” (*Poems*, pp. 559, n., 569). A portion including the above lines was published in *Sibylline Leaves* in 1816 with the title “The Night Piece: A Dramatic Fragment” (*Poems*, pp. 421-22), a fact that suggests that at the time of publishing *Kubla Khan* Coleridge was thinking of the nature and effects of pleasure beyond mortal limitations.

## Criticism: Richard Hoffpauir (essay date 1976)

SOURCE: Hoffpauir, Richard. “‘Kubla Khan’ and the Critics: Romantic Madness as Poetic Theme and Critical Response.” *English Studies in Canada* 2, no. 4 (winter 1976): 402-22.

[In the following essay, Hoffpauir surveys critical estimates of “Kubla Khan” since its first publication, arguing that the poem is “imagistically incoherent,” formally “imprecise,” and fails to live up to the designation of great poetry by which generations of scholars have regarded it.]

When the October 1974 issue of *PMLA* contained yet another article on “Kubla Khan” with the all too familiar subtitle, “Toward Interpretation,” I was reminded of and impressed by the continued solvency of the “Kubla Khan” industry. My researches had confirmed my suspicion that it is one of the most discussed poems in our literature and, as Charles Patterson, the writer of the *PMLA* article, began, “Perhaps no other poem of the time ... has evoked more widely diverging views of its meaning.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that the poem has evoked so many divergent and sometimes irreconcilable interpretations made me worry. Instead of celebrating the poem's malleability, as I had been taught to do in graduate school, I wondered if perhaps (1) the poet had not concerned himself thoroughly enough with efficient communication (believing as I do, and as I shall try to explain later, that a poem should be, in F. R. Leavis's words, “an instrument of clarification”<sup>2</sup>), or if perhaps (2) the readers of the poem over the past 150 years have not collaborated enough. My worry was confused by a second fact—that despite such persistent disagreement as to meaning, the poem has been just as persistently praised as a “masterpiece,” the “ideal of lyric poetry,” “a work of quite unparalleled beauty,” an oasis “in our dusty lives,” “the most purely magical [poem] in all English poetry,” and “one of the greatest poems in the language.”<sup>3</sup> While statements of that sort have markedly diminished in recent decades (as literary study has become more of a profession than a discipline), the frequency of attention must surely indicate the presence of the assumption of greatness. Else why waste so much time and more and more expensive journal space? Is it too much to ask that there be some correlation between interpretation and evaluation? Is it unreasonable to wonder at the lack of such correlation? If we can all agree, and at least this much does not seem to me to be too difficult, that “what criticism undertakes is the profitable discussion of literature” (Leavis again),<sup>4</sup> then all who peruse the criticism of “Kubla Khan” cannot help but conclude that it has not been very profitable.

I will attempt to do two things: to say something intelligent about the meaning and significance of “Kubla Khan” after having reviewed the heritage of critical opinion which for the most part has hindered the saying of anything very intelligent in the past. In other words, I would like to survey the grounds for that consistently high praise of the poem and to test it against what seems to me to be a more workable and defensible set of criteria. And as I do this, I hope it will appear as evident to you as it has to me that the history and weaknesses of the criticism of this particular poem are painfully representative of those of the criticism of too many other poems.

I



The poem itself, however, is not representative. It is unique in the fact that it has attached to it a preface written by Coleridge which explains the poem's origin and composition in an opium dream. While the changing attitudes towards the veracity of the preface can provide us with a structure for our review, they should not blind us to the larger relevancy of this case history.

For the sake of convenience, I shall divide this survey into three stages: (1) the contemporary reaction, ranging from the 1816 reviews of the poem when it first appeared in print to the early 1830s when Coleridge's death generated obituary evaluations of his accomplishment; (2) the Victorian reaction, ranging from the 1830s to the early 1920s when those dominant nineteenth-century values first confronted their greatest challenges; and (3) the modern reaction, in effect heralded by Lowes's *Road to Xanadu* published in 1927.

## 1 THE CONTEMPORARY REACTION

Contemporary readings and evaluations of "Kubla Khan" were based to a very large extent on total acceptance of the preface. The relevant passage states that the poet, after taking an anodyne,

continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two or three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him *as things*, with a parallel production of the corresponding expression, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved.<sup>5</sup>

Probably the earliest review of the poem, which appeared in the May 1816 issue of the *Critical Review*, established the problem for critics: the poem, the unacknowledged reviewer said, "is one of those pieces that can only speak for itself."<sup>6</sup> Evaluation had then to be based not on close analysis and rational understanding, but on the very value of such automatic writing. And most of the reviewers were traditional enough to wonder at Coleridge's modest presumption of curiosity in such writing:

"Kubla Khan," we think, only shews that Mr. Coleridge can write better nonsense verses than any man in England.

William Hazlitt, *Examiner*, 2 June 1816

it having been composed during sleep, there appears to us nothing in the quality of the lines to render this circumstance extraordinary.

Josiah Conder, *Eclectic Review*, June 1816

in sleep the judgment is the first faculty of the mind which ceases to act, therefore the opinion of the sleeper respecting his performance is not to be trusted, even in his waking moments.

Anonymous, *Literary Panorama*, July 1816<sup>7</sup>

Only one reviewer questions the possibility of such an origin to the poem: "we would yet ask him whether this extraordinary fragment was not rather the effect of rapid and instant composition after he was awake, than of memory immediately recording that which he dreamt when asleep?" (*Monthly Review*, 82 [Jan. 1817], 22-25). But that reviewer agrees finally with the very influential *Edinburgh Review's*<sup>8</sup> conclusion that the poem is "below criticism."

While everyone seemed to believe the preface and therefore never attempted close analysis, there were a few who were able to praise the poem for its musical qualities. The poem may have no meaning, they said, but it certainly sounds nice. Hazlitt was the first; in that same *Examiner* review he went on to say that “It is not a poem, but a musical composition” (a judgment echoed later in *The Spirit of the Age* when Hazlitt sums up Coleridge's entire accomplishment: “His words were hollow, but they pleased the ear”<sup>9</sup>). The less astute, and more accommodating, Leigh Hunt emphasized only the second half of Hazlitt's sentence, calling the poem “an everlasting tune in our mouths.”<sup>10</sup> By the 1830s, in one of the first examples of that general simplification of Romantic theories so characteristic of the later nineteenth century, the poem is declared valuable almost solely because of its melodious versification:

It is perfect music. The effect could scarcely have been more satisfactory to the ear had every syllable been selected merely for the sake of its sound.

John Bowring, *Westminster Review*, Jan. 1830<sup>11</sup>

The responses of Coleridge's contemporaries to the poem can be summed up then as follows: given their almost universal acceptance of Coleridge's account of how the poem was composed and their subsequent refusal to interpret, they either criticized the poet for publishing the dream product or praised the poem for so closely imitating music. Charles Lamb's cautious position represents the compromise; he finds “Kubla Khan” bewitching but probably meaningless: while the vision, as orally communicated by Coleridge, “irradiates” and “brings heaven and elysian bowers” into Lamb's parlour, he is afraid that the poem “is an owl that won't bear daylight. I fear lest it should be discovered by the lantern of typography and clear reducing to letters no better than nonsense or no sense” (letter to Wordsworth, April 1816).<sup>12</sup>

## 2 THE VICTORIAN REACTION

It was John Bowring, however, and not Charles Lamb, who established the direction that Victorian readers were to take. After a curious scarcity of interest in the poem for almost forty years after Coleridge's death, by 1870 and for the rest of the century it was presented by many influential critics as the ideal of lyric poetry. By this time there had developed, because of a narrowing of Romantic theory, a working distinction between the “poetical” on the one hand and the “ethical-intellectual” on the other. That which is least rationally considered and most abandoned to “the inspiration of the moment,” that which is “intense” and “charming,” “novel” and “original,” expressive of “wonder” and “delight,” that which appeals to the isolated emotions and senses, is called “poetical.” These terms appear again and again in Victorian considerations of the poem which almost unanimously conclude that, precisely *because* “Kubla Khan” is fragmentary and the product of a dream vision and so very musical, it is one of the most perfect of lyric poems. The critic who accepts these criteria can not help being impressionistic and finally irresponsible in his approach to individual poems. Here are some typical examples (a typicality which reminds us how difficult it has been to establish literary criticism as a discipline):

The poetical is ever an appeal to the deepest in the human mind, and a great burst of poetic light like [‘Kubla Khan’] lays bare for the imagination to roam in, a vast indefinite domain.

George Calver<sup>13</sup>

It is natural that his poetry at its highest should be, as it is, beyond all praise and all words of men ... The ‘Christabel’, the ‘Kubla Khan’, with one or two more, are outside all law and jurisdiction of ours. When it has been said that such melodies were never heard, such dreams never dreamed, such speech never spoken; the chief thing remains unsaid, and unspeakable. There is a charm upon these poems which can only be felt in silent submission of wonder.

A. C. Swinburne<sup>14</sup>

[It] is the visualizing of an opium-dream, a rarity of sensation at least as well worth literary immortality as any other experience whatever; and the feat is accomplished with a magic of sound and thought wholly incomparable.

John M. Robertson<sup>15</sup>

In the fine harmony of his diction and the pure power of his imagination, in the ability to do by means of words what the musician does by means of notes, what the painter does by means of colors, he had, among lyric poets, few equals,—he had no superior.

Tuley Huntington<sup>16</sup>

nineteenth century poetry has a soul, an essence, an aroma which eighteenth century poetry has not ... the panegyrists of the latter at the expense of the former deceive themselves in imagining that this homage is given to poetry, while it is really rendered to intellect ... [Coleridge] has shown within the compass of his own writings what is and what is not poetry, and forced all professed admirers of poetry to consider whether she can exist without inspiration ... Coleridge's themes ... are distinctly poetical; ... [which means that he is able] to create a perpetual feeling of enchantment by the constant but unobtrusive employment of the most beautiful and melodious words.

Richard Garnett<sup>17</sup>

In these fifty lines Coleridge has created a work of quite unparalleled beauty. It is impossible to say exactly wherein lies its charm. All the senses are appealed to and through them the reader is called upon to reconstruct the wonderful scene. But in spite of the direct appeal to the senses, probably each reader has his own image of the palace-dome and the sacred river. He is not called upon merely to look at what lies before him. Suggestions of the scene are given, and he has to re-create the whole.

Margaret Keeling<sup>18</sup>

We can see that the early nineteenth-century responses to the poem as beyond criticism and musical have been incorporated into a much fuller judgment of the poem based upon the criteria of suggestiveness (as opposed to clarity), novelty of subject matter (to the extent that the exotic and magical are preferred to the real and familiar), musicality and visuality of imagery (at the expense of the conceptual), and inspiration (implying a minimum of conscious control). Rhapsodic appeal to these values reinforced that reluctance to explicate we saw earlier in the century.

Since modern critics have either accepted the judgment based on these criteria, and the criteria themselves, without defending them, or agreed with the judgment but altered the criteria without arguing against the former criteria, it might be useful to pause here to consider the criteria theoretically.

## 1 SUGGESTIVENESS

If we can agree that poetry should be useful, as well as pleasurable, and that the quality of the utility depends on both efficiency and consensus of interpretation, then we must ask a poem to be as clear and as definite as possible in its communicated vision of that complexity which is human experience. A poem exists as no more than private therapy if it does not succeed in being understood by intelligent and diligent readers other than

the poet. In fact, one could argue, a poem does not really live except in the reaction of the reader to the words on the page. And if he can share that reaction with other readers, the gain is social as well as individual. If it has been the poet's concern to encourage or allow varieties of interpretation, to suggest rather than to define, to dissociate, for example, a word's connotation from its denotation, he has not communicated efficiently, and the poem's usefulness is greatly limited. Precision and accuracy are surely always to be valued in expression of any kind. Suggestiveness is not a quality to be celebrated; to do so is to imply that vagueness and unresolvable disagreement are themselves useful.

## 2 NOVELTY

The nineteenth-century concern with originality was very much involved in the philosophical belief that change is a positive value. As Morse Peckham states in his summary of Romantic beliefs:

Change is not man's punishment, it is his opportunity. Anything that continues to grow, or change qualitatively, is not perfect, can, perhaps, never be perfect. Perfection ceases to be a positive value. Imperfection becomes a positive value. Since the universe is changing and growing, there is consequently a *positive* and radical intrusion of novelty into the world.<sup>19</sup>

Surely the history of the past two centuries has made clear that such change for its own sake, progress unguided by moral intelligence, can be very dangerous and counterproductive. At the least, it tends to legitimize trivia. Recent trends in the course offerings of American universities give evidence of the continuing strength of that Romantic belief. But then the decision as to what is trivial and what is not, being difficult, and involved in uncritical notions of equality and democracy, has been avoided too often by too many. Unattended, as it too often is in Victorian criticism, "novelty" can be helpful as a descriptive, but not as an evaluative, term.

## 3 VERBAL MUSIC AND PAINTING

The Romantic tendency to submerge denotations and exploit connotations, a tendency which was doctrinized very early by Poe and later by Mallarmé, gave rise to a belief in verbal music, that is, in beautiful word-sounds detached or detachable from meaning. "It was easy," says F. W. Bateson, "to attribute the verbal associations not to the original meanings of the words but to their sounds."<sup>20</sup> But unless the language of the poetry is unknown both to the hearer and the reciter, there is always the strong probability that meaning will condition the response to the sound. And besides, why should we go to poetry for what can be so much more thoroughly provided by musical instruments? Praising a poem for its musical qualities, rather than or divorced from its meaning, is like recommending bear meat *because* its taste approximates that of beef. Poetic language can very crudely approximate musical effects, but it can do so much that music cannot do, that our attention should never be so restricted. Sound devices in verse should be the servants of meaning rather than of music.<sup>21</sup>

The argument against verbal painting is, of course, very similar. The mediums are radically different. Words are conceptual (or more precisely, "symbols for concepts"<sup>22</sup>), whereas musical notes and line, color, and shape are perceptual. While combinations of words restrict this conceptuality, they can never fully exist separate from the conceptual origin. That is, language has a generalizing power which should never be forgotten or undervalued. The important thing in a poem is not the object itself, but the understanding of the object. Just as language, being a totally human creation, can never be satisfactorily imitative of nature (that is, perceptual), so the other media, being partially mechanical and chemical creations, can never be satisfactorily conceptual. Again to quote Bateson, "a poem is a mental event, not a physical object" (*English Poetry*, p 14).

## 4 INSPIRATION

True poetry cannot exist, claimed one of the late Victorian critics, without inspiration. This is, of course, part of the subject matter of "Kubla Khan," which we shall return to later. Such belief in the value of inspiration is based upon that implicit confidence in the nineteenth century in the power and primacy of the subconscious mind. "Kubla Khan" was the epitome of lyric poetry for so many because, they thought, it wrote itself. Since the fact of inspiration is very difficult to prove, commentators are usually limited to pointing to the "magical" qualities of the verse. The word "magic" appears again and again in these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evaluations of "Kubla Khan." To label a passage as "magical" makes technical criticism impossible, if not a sacrilege. The most devastating dismissal of this criterion has been made by Yvor Winters. Here is Winters talking about the extreme consequences of Emerson's doctrine of surrender of the will and submission of oneself to the direct guidance of that portion of the Almighty Spirit which resides in the subconscious mind:

If there is no possibility of error, the revision of judgment is meaningless; immediate inspiration is correct; but immediate inspiration amounts to the same thing as unrevised reactions to stimuli; unrevised reactions are mechanical; man in a state of perfection is an automaton; an automatic man is insane. Hence Emerson's perfect man is a madman.<sup>23</sup>

And madness is not something we should be encouraging.

We can see, therefore, that the dissociation of sensibility which Eliot detected in the poets was also present in the critics. Behind these criteria is a conscious attempt to divorce connotation from denotation (or, the emotional from the intellectual), movement from direction, perception from conception, and instinct from will. And in the long run, appeal to such values demeans the communicative potential of that human construct which is the English language.

While the frequency of such appeal radically decreased after the 1920s, there were still many echoes in the writings of influential critics. For instance, in 1933 M. R. Ridley agrees with Kipling's characterization of lines 14-16 of "Kubla Khan" as "pure Magic. These are the clear Vision. The rest is only poetry."<sup>24</sup> The next year, a *TLS* reviewer spoke of "Kubla Khan" as "all music and picture ... pure dream ... lyricism itself ... a test in the evaluation of lyric poetry."<sup>25</sup> M. H. Abrams, one of the deans of modern Romantic studies, celebrated in *The Milk of Paradise* the "rich strangeness" and "true originality" of the poem, while claiming that it "cannot be analyzed" (pp 46-49). An attempt in 1937 by E. H. W. Meyerstein to argue for the poem's completeness and coherency is tempered by the refusal "to belittle the eternal wonder" of Coleridge's lyric.<sup>26</sup> In their *Critical History of English Poetry* (1944), Grierson and Smith refer to "the mystery, and the magic of phrase and cadence that enchant us in 'Kubla Khan.'"<sup>27</sup>

These are, however, not the loudest voices. On the whole, since the 1920s there has been a marked withdrawal from such appeals. It is as if the critics have said, "Yes, we know 'Kubla Khan' is a great poem; let us now get down to the more valuable work of interpreting it." The assumption, but not the justification, of greatness is there. While we may argue whether evaluation rightly comes during or after interpretation, we surely can never countenance its coming *before*. But yet that seems to be the case, right up to the present day.

### 3 THE MODERN REACTION

This basically non-evaluative modern criticism can be divided into two major phases, separated by two discoveries which became widely known and influenced readings of the poem after the mid-1950s. The first discovery was of an autographed manuscript version of "Kubla Khan," frequently referred to as the Crewe MS after the Marquess of Crewe, who owned it. The manuscript was first reported in 1934 by Alice Snyder in the *TLS* (2 Aug. 1934, p 541), but was not taken very seriously until Elisabeth Schneider argued, in an article published in 1945<sup>28</sup> (which was expanded into a book in 1953, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan*), that the manuscript and a wealth of medical evidence offered strong reasons for not believing the preface, for not

believing Coleridge's claim that the poem was composed in an opium dream. Not only do the differences between the manuscript version and that published in 1816 provide evidence of very conscious revisions (and there is little doubt that the manuscript was an earlier version), but also a MS note in Coleridge's hand contradicts the later preface. The note reads in part: "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium."<sup>29</sup> "A sort of Reverie" is a long way from a three-hour "profound sleep," as reported in 1816. Elisabeth Schneider begins with this, and after an exhaustive and impressive survey of medical and psychological evidence concludes that "opium could not possibly ever be responsible for any dream" and, therefore, that we should not believe the preface. "We need not read as glorious nonsense lines that make quite rational sense."<sup>30</sup> These combined discoveries changed the direction of criticism of the poem. But while no responsible reader after 1953 could ignore these findings, the type of criticism did not change. Critics both before and after were either source hunters or symbol hunters. That unfortunately had not changed, despite Schneider's effective attack on the weaknesses and limitations of both.

## 1 SOURCE HUNTERS

Source hunting is a rather easy target. As a branch of literary study it is a product of the Romantic notion that an understanding of the process of composition is the same thing as an understanding of the poem. "If you can define what goes on in the poet's mind, you will have defined poetry" (Bateson, p 49). Wordsworth and Coleridge, for instance, often substitute a definition of the poet for a definition of poetry. At its most valuable, source hunting can be an adjunct to biography (or even psychology). It can help us understand *how* a poem came to be written, but not what value it has. When the source is clearly alluded to within the poem, when, consequently, readers can agree as to both the working relevancy and identity of the source, it becomes part of the poem's content. If a knowledge of a source which is not so clearly alluded to is necessary for an understanding of the poem's meaning, the poem fails to be reasonably self-sufficient. When the source is not a part of the work as a linguistic fact, as is the case with "Kubla Khan," the discovery that Coleridge read Bartram's *Travels*, or anything else, is of very limited value.

John Livingston Lowes, whose *The Road to Xanadu* appeared in 1927, seemed to confuse his very restricted kind of scholarship with criticism. And this confusion was aided by two beliefs which underpin his enthusiastic "glittering parade" (as Wimsatt sarcastically called the study<sup>31</sup>): first an outdated belief in Hartleyan associationism (which Coleridge himself repudiated), and second a belief in the doctrine of inspiration. From an overly eager acceptance of Coleridge's account in the preface to the poem, Lowes was led to the indefensible position of proposing that "Kubla Khan" is, on the one hand, one of "the most remarkable poems in English," "a thing of unique and imperishable beauty," "as near enchantment . . . as we are like to come in this dull world," a work of "glory," with "an almost magical potency," and, on the other hand, an irresponsible, random confluence of imagery, which is finally meaningless because thinking "had abdicated its control," a fragment whose final value seems to lie in its "witching music."<sup>32</sup> Lowes felt not the least discomfort in describing the final stanza of the poem as both "a picture of unimpaired and thrilling vividness" (p 374) and incoherent (p 331), or describing the linked and interweaving images as "irresponsibly and gloriously" streaming, which are "as aimless as [they are] magnificent" (pp 376-77). That which is incoherent, irresponsible, and aimless is also vivid, glorious, and magnificent!

We have here, then, an example of those same questionable Victorian values lurking behind twentieth-century professionalism. Lowes's 570-odd pages do little more than support the previously clear proposition that Coleridge worked primarily from books. The section on "Kubla Khan" certainly comes nowhere near bridging the gap between the sources of the poet's imagery and the poem itself. The pity is not simply that one man may have wasted over eight years of his life, but that Lowes's work has become very influential. Numerous scholars for the past forty years have been offering footnotes to Lowes's book. And the important fact is that there has been no agreement. The images of the poem have their origin in such diverse sources as the apocryphal Book of Tobit,<sup>33</sup> Hesiod's *Theogony*,<sup>34</sup> the writings of Jacob Boehme,<sup>35</sup> Sir William Jones's "A

Hymn to Ganga”<sup>36</sup> or his “The Palace of Fortune,”<sup>37</sup> the writings of Annianus Marcillinus,<sup>38</sup> Southey's *Common-Place Book* and epic narrative *Thalaba the Destroyer*,<sup>39</sup> Fielding's *Tom Jones*,<sup>40</sup> Joseph Sterling's “Cambuscan,”<sup>41</sup> Wieland's *Oberon*,<sup>42</sup> Spenser's *Faerie Queene*,<sup>43</sup> Milton's *Paradise Lost*,<sup>44</sup> and Goldsmith's “The Deserted Village.”<sup>45</sup>

As biographical notes on Coleridge's reading, many of these studies fail to conform to simple rules of evidence. Because Coleridge “read everything,” argues one scholar, “who can doubt that [he] knew Hesiod's *Theogony*.”<sup>46</sup> “No reason to believe ... that he did not see this periodical,” says another.<sup>47</sup> S. C. Harrex in a 1966 article shamelessly offers the most extreme example of irresponsible scholarship: “I do not claim,” he concludes, “that the source of Coleridge's dome is the Goldsmith passage [in “The Deserted Village”], but I do suggest that it is no more unlikely than many of the sources which have been attributed to him”!<sup>48</sup>

The few who have crossed over the line into criticism have been equally irresponsible. Some offer interpretations based on what is clear in the proposed source rather than in “Kubla Khan”: e.g. Hans Meier, arguing for Coleridge's indebtedness to *Paradise Lost*, says that Coleridge's fountain is to be associated with evil, because in Milton's poem “it is through a fountain that Satan gains his second entrance into the garden.”<sup>49</sup> Others go so far as to speak to the richness (and hence value) of the poem simply because various sources are detectable.<sup>50</sup> We have here a method which has allowed literary scholars to avoid the difficulty that is always involved in a disciplined confrontation with the poem itself. And we have evidence to support I. A. Richards's contention that “the mental processes of the poet are not a very profitable field for investigation. They offer far too happy a hunting-ground for uncontrollable conjecture.”<sup>51</sup>

## 2 SYMBOL HUNTERS

The symbolist critics are much more obviously modern in their approach, but only slightly more productive. They differ from the Victorians in insisting that the poem does indeed have meaning. Their insistence is often, however, extreme. The single criterion for greatness seems to be the very presence of symbols, the assumption being that every good poem is symbolic. Again the starting point for one's unease is the fact of irreconcilable differences. That is, even though there may be different “levels of meaning” in a poem, those levels must be present in the surface of the language (that is, the key must be given *within* the poem; there must be internal evidence of the necessity of a symbolic reading), and those levels must harmonize with one another and with the emotional content of the poem. All the critics cannot all be right. If they are, then human creativity as human responsibility, in Leavis's sense,<sup>52</sup> has not been properly served. If a poem can mean only what it happens to mean to any reader, extreme subjectivity, but not community, has been advanced. And such advancement is the antithesis of education, which we must all believe in.

Before Elisabeth Schneider forced critics to see the poem as a conscious creation, and therefore subject to the normal rigors of analysis, symbolist readings remained self-defensively open and vague. Robert Graves, playing the psychoanalyst in *The Meaning of Dreams* (1924), allows the poem to be symbolic both of the course of life (the sacred river) from birth to death and of Coleridge's relationships with his wife and Dorothy Wordsworth.<sup>53</sup> Maud Bodkin, more Jungian in her approach, discusses the poem as the archetype of heaven and hell; to point out that pattern in the imagery seems to her enough.<sup>54</sup> G. Wilson Knight reads it as an amazingly compressed and multidirectional commentary on the dynamic of *general* creation (Kubla as God).<sup>55</sup> After Schneider, there developed a consensus that the poem is more specifically about poetry and the poetic process. But while the individual readings are more precise, there is no agreement. Is “Kubla Khan,” as Humphry House argues, “a triumphant positive statement of the potentialities of poetry,” or, a statement of frustration, as Cannon and Bostetter claim?<sup>56</sup> Is Xanadu celebrated as the momentary realization of paradise by the poet-king<sup>57</sup> or is it the contrived artifice of a tyrant improperly imposing his will on nature?<sup>58</sup> Is Coleridge focusing upon the poetic potential of daydreams,<sup>59</sup> the primitive way of thinking,<sup>60</sup> remembrance,<sup>61</sup> or the daemonic?<sup>62</sup> That is, just what is being said about poetry?

Biographical readers have equally stressed different things. James Bramwell would have us read the poem as a confessional record of Coleridge's failures as a poet.<sup>63</sup> Douglas Angus detects an exposure of classic narcissism.<sup>64</sup> S. K. Heninger, Jr. sees "'the individuation process,' an integration of disparate elements by which the personality achieves identity and wholeness."<sup>65</sup> James Hoyle wants us to believe that "the psychology of elation or hypomania" informs the poem, and that it records the results of a neurotic person's "'vegetative retreat' to parasympathetic preponderance with overstimulation of gastrointestinal functions, resulting in diarrhea."<sup>66</sup> The most recent Freudian interpretation has been offered by Norman Fruman, who observes in the poem unresolved incestuous conflicts, hatred of women, divided personality, fear of sex, and homosexual impulses.<sup>67</sup>

One wonders if the motive of these symbol hunters is much different from that of those pious mythographers of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance who insisted upon reading pagan fables as Christian allegories. "Works of the past that we still value but cannot by any modern principle find reason for approving we salvage by finding in them a symbolic substratum that conforms to our present values." That sentence was written by Elisabeth Schneider<sup>68</sup> in her long criticism of the symbolist approach, a criticism which has never been adequately confronted by the hordes that descended on the poem in the 1950s and 1960s. Not one of these critics has satisfactorily justified a symbolic reading. The most explicit defences have taken three forms: (1) from those who believe the preface, since all dreams are symbolic expressions of hidden meanings, the poem must be so read; (2) from Jungian critics, since all poetry is the communication of archetypal wisdom, the poem must be so read; (3) from those relying on internal evidence, there is some indefinable something in the poem which, as Richard Haven has said, "forces us to awareness of a symbolic order."<sup>69</sup> And, regardless of the particular defence, too often the act of judgment (usually itself implicit rather than explicit) extends no further than the satisfaction of extracting symbolic meaning.

Even if the poem is symbolic, which has not been proven to my satisfaction and for which there is negligible evidence within the poem, is not that in itself cause for concern? I would, somewhat cautiously I admit, go so far as to say that symbolism as it has been understood for the past two centuries can be a rather cheap figurative device in poetry. I am speaking of that Romantic and post-Romantic definition of a symbol as a poetic object which has a multitude of meanings. John Unterecker, in *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*, has put it plainly (but uncritically):

Any analogy we can construct for the symbol, any meaning we assign to it, is legitimate so long as we recognize that meaning is *not* its meaning. Its meaning must be more elusive than any value we can—with words—fix to it. All that the meaning we assign to a symbol can ever be is either part of its meaning or one of its possible meanings. No symbol has *a* meaning.<sup>70</sup>

This defeats, or at least greatly hinders, the proper function of the poem to clarify.

We should also be disturbed by the not surprising fact that none of the critics mentioned above dares speak to the rightness or wrongness of the "meaning" they extract, to the validity of Coleridge's supposed commentary on poetry within the poem.

So, as we have seen, like the source hunters, this even more numerous band of readers has not allowed the poem to speak for itself. Here we have a method which encourages originality and cleverness, but not necessarily the truth. It is a method which, as Schneider sarcastically notes, "has ... brought to life a great many critics" (p 7), critics who, I might add, should have remained dormant. And, in looking back on this survey, I am, in a perhaps unprofessional mood, tempted to suggest the applicability to this survey of what Winters said about the Poe and Emerson industries: "a good deal of what has been written and very respectably published is unmitigated twaddle" (*In Defense of Reason*, p 566).

## II



But all this does not really prove very much about the poem itself. So far I have attempted only to establish grounds for censuring the critics. But such censure can help us be responsible when we read. So let us finally turn to the poem itself and approach it through criteria which, I firmly believe, are more productive of defensible and sharply relevant discriminations and avoid the pitfalls of those I have surveyed.

First of all, we must agree to take the poem seriously and not to allow the preface to disarm our critical faculties. Schneider's medical evidence raises doubts as to the simple possibility of opium dreams. The presence of the Crewe MS clearly proves that, despite the preface, and regardless of the origin of the poem, the published version is a conscious effort. If Coleridge was really interested in presenting it as a "psychological curiosity," as an example of automatic writing, why would he tamper with it?<sup>71</sup>

If it is not a literal dream vision, to what genre, if any, does it belong? The critics have disagreed here as well. Most play it safe by seeing it simply as a lyric; others, however, insist on reading it as a short Pindaric ode (Meyerstein), a visionary romance (Beyer), a frustrated narrative (Bostetter), a foretaste of a long epic poem.<sup>72</sup> G. Wilson Knight wants to liken it to Dante's *Paradiso* and Richard Gerber to a four-part sonata. I would ask if there is reason to believe it is anything other than what it clearly appears to be on the surface: 36 lines of landscape description, followed by 18 lines of commentary on the possibility of writing such descriptive verse. Of course, landscape poetry is not the most distinguished or exalted of genres, which perhaps explains the reluctance of most critics to be content with such a simple question. Most symbolic readings depend on an emphasis on the few non-descriptive items in the first section of the poem: the simile in lines 14-16, the narrative intrusion of "ancestral voices" (line 30), and the vague judgment of the scene in line 35: "It was a miracle of rare device."

This takes us to the first of my proposed criteria: what broadly we refer to as "coherency," what Coleridge would call the "wholeness" of a poem, the unified relationship of part to whole. The first suggestion of difficulty in this area comes in lines 12-16. Before that, the poem is directly descriptive, with no explicit indication of the poet's attitude towards the pleasure garden. But in those five lines, containing as they do five exclamation marks and the first of three similes in the poem, the poet seems to move beyond mere description. The purpose of the third simile, lines 21-22, is clear and strictly visual: the more familiar sight of rebounding hail or flailed chaff analogizes the particular motion of the "huge fragments" and emphasizes the tremendous force of the "burst" of the fountain. The comparison aids in rendering the verbal picture more precise.

The same cannot be said of the first simile. Not only is there the modern resentment of those ejaculations, but also the failure of either that unexpected and undeveloped change in tone or that cryptic allusion to a wailing woman and demon-lover to advance the primary function of the simile to vivify the "romantic chasm." Or, perhaps, we should be warned by the word "romantic" to expect only diffuseness. The adjectives "savage," "holy," and "enchanted" are no less general after the simile than before.

The second simile,

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,

(lines 17-18)

while still not calling upon the expectedly familiar, at least offers a personification which, however indirectly, does aid perception.

The next major deviation from description, lines 29-30, is like that first simile, suggestive rather than defining. This likewise appears to be an allusion, historical rather than mythical, but what function does it serve in *this* poem? Is there any connection between this intrusion, which is narrative, and that of the wailing

woman, which is atmospheric? One might argue that the sense of supernatural dread of the first is enforced by the second. But what is all this suggestiveness leading to? Surely the relatively mild “miracle” of line 35 is not worth all the excited fuss created earlier. That is, these three oddities, which do, indeed, extend the poem from description to seeming impassioned lyric judgment of the scene, do not cohere. No unified purpose is advanced.

A similar disparity exists in the last section of the poem. The damsel is explicitly within the poem a source of inspiration for the poet. But why, one must ask, is she Abyssinian? And what does Abyssinia have to do with Xanadu, presumably in China, beyond the fact that they are both exotic places beyond pedestrian Western Europe? And what significance is to be placed in her dulcimer? It is not, contrary to the belief of some critics, an instrument native to the Near or Middle East. As William Templeman argued in 1931, the instrument was not unknown in England in the later eighteenth century and “whether or not the dulcimer was generally familiar, the mention of it in ‘Kubla Khan’ seems to bring a decidedly English note into Coleridge’s romantic melody which is so largely Oriental.”<sup>73</sup> The word itself is French in origin. C. M. Bowra speculates that, because a dulcimer is “not a very melodious or a very elegant instrument,” Coleridge was probably only interested in the pretty consonantal correspondence with “damsel.”<sup>74</sup> I would go farther and agree with Marius Bewley (who has written one of the very few helpful essays on the poem) that the resulting alliteration of line 37 is “almost vulgar with its blatant, unmeaning emphasis.”<sup>75</sup> And besides, a dulcimer is hardly capable of producing the “symphony” of line 43, another example, perhaps, of the poet’s concern with sound at the expense of sense. And where, pray tell, is Mount Abora? In Abyssinia? In Xanadu? Garland Cannon (p 138) suggests a reference to the Abor Hills, which rim the frontier between India and China, that is, on the road from Abyssinia to Xanadu. (Xanadu, by the way, is Coleridge’s stretching for metrical regularity of Purchas’s two-syllable Xamdu.) The “Mount Amara” of the Crewe MS is, of course, a clear allusion to Milton’s pseudo-paradise in Abyssinia (*Paradise Lost*, iv, 268-84), and Coleridge’s revision, like too many of his first choices, leads away from such clarity.

And what, we must continue to ask, has this African maid playing on a European instrument singing of a non-existent mountain to do with the frenzied poet imaged in the final lines of the poem? Why should the memory of her song lead to an imaginative rebuilding of the Tartar king’s pleasure grounds, an act which in turn alienates the deranged poet from his frightened public? And has not that imaginary rebuilding already been accomplished in the first 36 lines of the poem? It is often too much to ask that a Romantic poet offer us a *rational* motive for a heightened emotional response. But is it also too much to ask that some motive be discernible?

A second, invocable criterion is *precision of form*, a precision determined in large part by appropriateness of form to content. I am proceeding here on the basis of two assumptions (and here I again quote Yvor Winters): (1) that “the greatest fluidity of statement [in a poem] is possible where the greater clarity of form prevails,” in other words, the more strict the verse form, the greater the potential for subtle and complex expression; and (2) that form is “identical with the will or the ability to control and shape one’s experience” and hence the moral content of a poem can partially reside in the form.<sup>76</sup> The most thorough published attempts to account for the form of “Kubla Khan” have been made by Alan Purves and Elisabeth Schneider.

Purves<sup>77</sup> concentrates on rhyme schemes and line lengths, delegating the paucity of metrical variation to the simple, but highly questionable, function of creating a sense of wholeness. Pointing, for instance, at lines 6-11, which describe the dome, and lines 31-36, which describe the shadow of the dome, he claims a “symbolic use of form” in that the second passage reverses the rhyme and line length pattern of the first, the two thereby being “mirror images” of each other. He goes on to argue, much too assertively, that, because the line lengths and rhyme schemes of passages dealing with Kubla, the ability to decree, and the forces of nature involved in creation (lines 1-5, 12-24) are restated in the later passages (lines 37-41 and 42-54) dealing with the poet and his power of creation, therefore a significant relationship exists between Kubla and the poet. In addition, the fact that such restatement is imperfect emphasizes, he says, the significant differences between

the two modes of creation, that of the average man involved with temporality and finitude (i.e., Kubla) and that of the poet.

To agree with the ingenious Purves is to charge Coleridge with a very limited, merely imitative use of a form which appears not to be very precise solely because Coleridge wants to suggest but not to define a limitation to a suggested but unelaborated comparison. The form only echoes a failure in the denotative content of the poem. To disagree with Purves, especially with his conclusion that such connection of form and meaning as he demonstrates proves that the poem is not a fragment, but “complete and carefully wrought,” is simply to demand that the values of completeness and care be applied with more responsibility and discrimination. It seems to me that Purves has inadvertently pointed to a weakness and not a strength in the poem.

Elisabeth Schneider, while more thorough in her study of the complex sound effects of the poem (pp 270-76), is like Purves in primarily being interested in proving the poem a conscious creation. But if Purves irresponsibly relates sound patterns to meaning, Schneider is irresponsible in refusing to relate, to any meaningful extent. Claiming that Coleridge deliberately reflected in “Kubla Khan” the “free and imperfect” rhyming effects of Milton’s “Lycidas,” she does not suggest how such an esoteric sound allusion might advance meaning. Coleridge’s use of modified *a* sounds, so common in eastern names, is designed solely to create atmosphere. Her final study of the way in which elaborate alliterations and assonances of the first five lines cause the one unechoed sound, “dome,” to stand out alone is much more helpful and quite insightful. If anything, however, she offers proof that Coleridge was indeed consciously more interested in music than meaning.

Schneider’s identification of sound devices in the opening lines does, however, support my earlier suggestion that the poem is fairly successful as descriptive vision with adequately sensitive sound effects through line 11. After that, unsynthesized halting rhythms serve only to reinforce the dissatisfaction the reader feels with those undeveloped and unrelated similes and images. Vincent Buckley, I should mention, is less disturbed, praising the poem’s energy and dramatic intensity: “The poetry is vigorous, various, impetuous, rather than haunting.”<sup>78</sup> I would simply add, rather than controlled and more highly communicative.

If “Kubla Khan” is primarily a landscape poem, primarily descriptive, that generic distinction itself involves a judgment, for it is a very minor genre: as I stated earlier, while details are important in poetry, conclusions drawn from details are so much more important. Verbal depiction and recreation can never be as accurate as pictorial imitation. And such depiction of action or scene is rarely *per se* very helpful or meaningful. But, of course, it would be unfair to say that all those landscape poets of the eighteenth century were interested solely in such simple imitation. They attached intense and often profound emotions to rocks and stones and trees. This raises two questions (and thus two more criteria): how accurate, vivid, and truthful is the description? and how appropriate is the emotional response to the subsequently apprehended subject?

An answer to the first question depends on how easily one visualizes Kubla’s pleasure garden. Where is the dome, for instance, in relation to the chasm and river? No precise answer is possible. Fruman would like us to believe that the dome is on the edge of the chasm, in order to validate his Freudian reading. Beginning with what has to be one of the silliest proposals in Coleridge criticism: “Why confine the pleasure-dome to a breast symbol?” (p 396), he proceeds to detect what he calls “almost classic symbols for primary sexual terrain”: dome as *mons veneris*, green hill with cedarn cover as pubic region, chasm as vagina. But Coleridge’s imprecise geography is matched by Fruman’s imprecise anatomy: a page later he wants the fountain rising from that vaginal chasm to be a male ejaculation. So inspired, one would go on to read the subsequently meandering river born of that fountain as the result of *coitus interruptus*—but then what about those measureless caverns two lines later? The proverbial mind boggles.

The vividness which resides, one must remember, in rather general adjectives, such as “fertile,” “bright,” “sinuous,” “incense-bearing,” “ancient,” and “sunny” in the first section of the poem<sup>79</sup> begins to fade rapidly

from line 12 on. The new tone of awe and perhaps dread established in the first simile obscures rather than advances our perception.<sup>80</sup>

But then, as Schneider argues (p 277), perhaps Coleridge had no desire to describe with any vividness or precision. Coleridge, she speculates, may have been attempting to write descriptive poetry according to a principle advanced by Lessing; here is Coleridge's summary, in one of his letters from Germany, of that principle:

I could half suspect that what are deemed fine descriptions, produce their effects almost purely by a charm of words, with which and with whose combinations, we associate *feelings* indeed, but no distinct *Images*.

If Schneider's speculation is true, then that very theoretical and psychological decision, as well as the obscure poetic product, must be criticized.

One can gain a *general* sense of the movement of the river in relationship to the enclosed park: born in the fountain, it slowly moves on the surface, then falls into caverns where it sinks eventually into a subterranean ocean, which, one assumes, is the source of an underground river which then becomes the source of the fountain. It is very tempting to read that circularity which connects the surface with the subsurface as symbolic of something: the course of a man's life (birth-death-rebirth), or the course of nature in and out of man's civilizing control, or the course of poetry from the natural to the artificial back to the natural. Many critics have been so tempted. Even more important than the lack of any justification within the poem for such readings is the inability of such generally apprehended circularity to say anything precise and therefore important about life or nature or poetry.

The second question (how appropriate is the emotional response to the subject matter, which as we have seen is not very fully apprehended?) leads us to two statements in the poem which come closest to providing us with the poet's attitude towards what he is describing: the judgment of the juxtaposed dome and caves as "a miracle of rare device" and the obvious desire of the poet in the last section to imitate Kubla's "miracle." A lot of emotional energy and importance is invested in that juxtaposition. Why? Any answer depends on a symbolic value which is non-existent within the very terms of the poem. Both Richard Fogle and Marshall Suther say the poem is about man's attempt to reconcile opposites or to assert unity in the face of opposing forces. But there is no moral context given such reconciliation. Certainly goals must be defined before processes can be presented as exemplary. The only goal presented in the poem is social alienation and maybe even madness. Let me quote from Fogle's essay, "The Romantic Unity of 'Kubla Khan'":

in "Kubla Khan," as probably in all *good* romantic poetry, the pleasure which draws us within the poem is also inseparable from its full meaning. Imaginative delight in the wonders of the pleasure-ground is indispensable to the sense of their opposite. Fully to appreciate the theme's potentialities, *we must be beguiled* into believing *momentarily* in the permanency of the impermanent, the possibility of the impossible ... It is in the truest sense a completed work in that it symbolizes and comprehends the crucial romantic dilemma ... The romantic poet as idealist and monist strives to include within his cosmos both actual and ideal ... His attempt, however, coexists with his *consciousness that he seeks the unattainable*; the ideal can never be fully actualized. Thus in good romantic poetry there is a continuous tension, compacted of the sense of the immense potentialities of his theme set off against the knowledge that they can only partially be realized. This tension and conflict can be reconciled and rendered valuable partly by the poet's own belief in the value of the attempt itself.

(P 51, italics mine)

Good poetry, says one of the more astute of Romantic apologists, beguiles us into believing a falsehood! And this he dares call “essential profundity” (p 50). This is not just unmitigated twaddle; it is pernicious twaddle.

We come finally to my final criterion, which has already partially been spoken to, that is, the validity of the ideas which motivate and inform the poem. Poems, of course, do not give us ideas in any meaningful or efficient way. That is the job of expository prose. But they do give us thoughts by way of emotion and moral attitude, thoughts often arising out of an ideal or belief that, if we are to take the poet and his poem seriously, cannot be left unjudged. In other words, to take a poem seriously is to inquire: what am I asked to believe? I have already referred to the limited value of the idea of the reconciliation of opposites as it is seen by Fogle and Suther to inform the poem. A much more explicit idea is contained in the last seven lines of the poem. It is an idea which, as most critics agree,<sup>81</sup> comes from Plato: the idea that effective poetic creation is “a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention,” and “all good poets ... are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains” (*Phaedrus* 265a,b and *Ion* 533e-34e). Almost every argument I have offered in this essay has been directed against that idea, which experience tells us is not only wrong but destructive. Sanity and intelligent collaboration with other human beings are absolutely necessary for the continuance of civilization. That is not the kind of statement an academic, as opposed to a politician, enjoys making. One would hope that such things would not have to be said. But apparently they do. I can only remind you of Matthew Arnold's definition:

The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time, who have labored to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanize it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time.<sup>82</sup>

Our Romantic heritage (especially as it has affected the way poetry is written and read) has made that civilizing task very difficult.

“Kubla Khan,” a poem which, although read in many different and contradictory ways, has never ceased being regarded, by the academy at least, as a great poem, fails the test I have offered: it is imagistically incoherent, its form is imprecise, the offered perception is vague, the emotional content is inappropriate given the subject matter, and the informing idea is foolish. So, one can conclude, bringing the two parts of this modest attempt at sabotage together: never has so much been said by so many about so little. It is time the poem was taken down from its exclusive pedestal. For, surely, a great poem can offer us more than “Kubla Khan” does, can it not?

#### Notes

1. Charles Patterson, “The Daemoniac in ‘Kubla Khan’: Toward Interpretation,” *PMLA*, 89 (1974), 1033.
2. F. R. Leavis, “Thought and Emotional Quality,” *Scrutiny*, 13 (1945), 70.
3. George H. Calvert, *Coleridge, Shelley, Goethe* (Boston 1880), p 12; Arthur Symonds, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (London 1909), p 140; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems of Nature and Romance 1794-1807*, ed Margaret A. Keeling (Oxford 1910), p 216; M. H. Abrams, *The Milk of Paradise* (Cambridge, Mass. 1934), p 49; Thomas Copeland, “A Woman Wailing for Her Demon Lover,” *Review of English Studies*, 17 (1941), 87; Marshall Suther, *Visions of Xanadu* (New York 1965), p 17.
4. F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation* (Harmondsworth 1972), pp 15-16.
5. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London 1969), p 296. All further citations from the preface and the poem will refer, unless otherwise noted, to this edition.
6. As quoted in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, ed J. R. de J. Jackson (New York 1970), p 205.
7. As quoted in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, pp 208-9, 212, 216.

8. 27 (Sept. 1816), 58-67.
9. (New York n.d.), p 49.
10. *Examiner*, 21 Oct. 1821, pp 664-67.
11. As quoted in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, p 550.
12. As quoted by Keeling, p 216.
13. *Coleridge, Shelley, Goethe*, p 14.
14. *Essays and Studies*, 5th ed (London 1901), pp 262-63.
15. *New Essays Towards A Critical Method* (London 1897), p 189.
16. Tuley F. Huntington, ed, *The Ancient Mariner, Kubla Khan, Christabel*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1898), rev H. Y. Moffett (New York 1929), pp xl-xli.
17. *Essays of An Ex-Librarian* (London 1901), pp 64, 97.
18. *Poems of Nature and Romance*, p 216.
19. "Toward a Theory of Romanticism," in *Romanticism: Points of View*, ed Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe, 2nd ed (Englewood Cliffs 1970), p 237 (italics mine).
20. *English Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed (London 1968), p 22.
21. Bateson, p 28.
22. See Yvor Winters's argument in *The Function of Criticism* (Chicago 1957), pp 82, 60-61.
23. *In Defense of Reason*, 3rd ed (Chicago 1947), pp 54-55.
24. *Keats' Craftsmanship* (1933; rpt London 1965), p 227.
25. "Coleridge Is Dead," *TLS*, 19 July 1934, P 497.
26. "Completeness of Kubla Khan," *TLS*, 30 Oct. 1937, p 803.
27. (London 1944), P 311.
28. "The 'Dream' of 'Kubla Khan'," *PMLA*, 60 (1945), 784-801.
29. See John Shelton, "The Autograph Manuscript of 'Kubla Khan' and an Interpretation," *Review of English Literature*, 7 (1966), 32-42.
30. *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago 1953), pp 88-89.
31. *The Verbal Icon* (New York 1964), p 11.
32. *The Road to Xanadu* (New York 1959), pp 3, 313, 374, 377, 321, 376, 373. See also p 549, n 11: "the poem has perhaps no rivals in the qualities for which we have no better name than 'verbal music.'"
33. Copeland, pp 87-90.
34. R. H. Milner, "Coleridge's 'Sacred River,'" *TLS*, 18 May 1951, p 309.
35. Dorothy F. Mercer, "The Symbolism of 'Kubla Khan,'" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 12 (1953), 44-66.
36. Garland H. Cannon, "A New, Probable Source for 'Kubla Khan,'" *College English*, 17 (1955), 136-42.
37. Warner U. Ober, "Southey, Coleridge, and 'Kubla Khan,'" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 58 (1959), 414-22.
38. John M. Patrick, "Ammianus and Alpheus: The Sacred River," *Modern Language Notes*, 72 (1957), 335-37.
39. Ober.
40. Robert F. Fleissner, "'Kubla Khan' and 'Tom Jones': An Unnoticed Parallel," *Notes and Queries*, 205 (1960), 103-5.
41. Francis Willard Emerson, "Joseph Sterling's 'Cambuscan' in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan,'" *Notes and Queries*, 205 (1960), 102-3.
42. Werner W. Beyer, *The Enchanted Forest* (Oxford 1963), pp 122-42.
43. Hans Heinrich Meier, "Ancient Lights on Kubla's Lines," *English Studies*, 46 (1965), 15-29.
44. Ibid.
45. S. C. Harrex, "Coleridge's Pleasure-Dome in 'Kubla Khan,'" *Notes and Queries*, 13 (1966), 172-73.
46. Milner, p 309.
47. Cannon, p 136.
48. Harrex, p 172.

49. Meier, p 19; see also Cannon, Harrex, and David H. Karrfalt, "Another Note on 'Kubla Khan' and Coleridge's Retirement to Ash Farm," *Notes and Queries*, 13 (1966), 171-72.
50. Beyer, p 142, and Richard Gerber, "Keys to 'Kubla Khan,'" *English Studies*, 44 (1963), 341.
51. *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 5th ed (New York 1934), p 29.
52. *Nor Shall My Sword* (London 1972), pp 11-37.
53. (London 1924), pp 145-58.
54. *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934; rpt New York 1958), pp 91-110.
55. *The Starlit Dome* (1941; rpt London 1971), pp 83-97, 178.
56. Humphry House, *Coleridge* (London 1962), p 116; Cannon, p 139; Edward Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle 1963), pp 85-90.
57. See *Coleridge's Verse*, ed William Empson and David Pirie (London 1972), pp 83-86; Richard Harter Fogle, *The Permanent Pleasure* (Athens, Georgia 1974), pp 43-52; Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (New York 1961), pp 230-33; Meier, pp 26-27; Shelton, pp 37-39.
58. See George Watson, "The Meaning of 'Kubla Khan,'" *A Review of English Literature*, 2 (1961), 21-29; J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London 1959), pp 206-76.
59. Max F. Schulz, *The Poetic Voices of Coleridge* (Detroit 1963), pp 114-23.
60. Allan Rodway, *The Romantic Conflict* (London 1963), pp 172-74.
61. Kathleen Raine, "Traditional Symbolism in *Kubla Khan*," *Sewanee Review*, 72 (1964), 626-42.
62. Patterson, pp 1033-42.
63. "Kubla Khan—Coleridge's Fall?" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 53 (1952), 449-66.
64. "The Theme of Love and Guilt in Coleridge's Three Major Poems," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 59 (1960), 655-68.
65. "A Jungian Reading of 'Kubla Khan,'" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 18 (1960), 359.
66. "'Kubla Khan' as an Elated Experience," *Literature and Psychology*, 16 (1966), 27-39.
67. *Coleridge, The Damaged Archangel* (New York 1971), pp 396-407.
68. *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan*, p 6.
69. *Patterns of Consciousness: An Essay on Coleridge* (Amherst 1969), p 181.
70. (New York 1959), p 34.
71. See Fruman's thorough discussion of the doubtful veracity of the preface, pp 334-50.
72. Patricia Adair, *The Waking Dream: A Study of Coleridge's Poetry* (London 1967), p 137.
73. "A Note on the Dulcimer," *TLS*, 2 April 1931, p 271.
74. *The Romantic Imagination* (1949; rpt New York 1961), pp 277-78. There is even disagreement among the critics as to just what a dulcimer is. Kathleen Raine (p 639) contends it is a one-stringed instrument, while William Templeman (p 271) and the *OED* suggest a multi-stringed instrument.
75. "The Poetry of Coleridge," *Scrutiny*, 8 (1940), 412.
76. *In Defense of Reason*, pp 23, 26.
77. "Formal Structure in 'Kubla Khan,'" *Studies in Romanticism*, 1 (1962), 187-91.
78. "Coleridge: Vision and Actuality," *The Melbourne Critical Review*, 4 (1961), 7.
79. Bewley, p 414.
80. Certain grammatical confusions do not help either. What is the antecedent of "it" in line 24? Clarity would demand "burst," but syntax requires "fountain." And how can a river which is "meandering with a mazy motion" (line 25) have "waves" (line 31)? Fruman offers a convincing explanation for this problem (p 341).
81. See especially Patterson, p 1034.
82. *Culture and Anarchy* (London 1869), p 49.

## Criticism: John Beer (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: Beer, John. "The Languages of 'Kubla Khan.'" In *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Peter Laver*, edited by Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe, pp. 220-62. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1985.

*[In the following excerpt, Beer offers perspectives on “Kubla Khan” as a work about poetic genius.]*

A close reading of “Kubla Khan” makes one aware of an irresolution in the imagery which stands in marked contrast to the homogeneity of the verse. Throughout the poem there runs a strong incantatory strain, within which we become aware of an ingenious poetic language. The feminine rhymes in the second, third and fourth stanzas bring in a lightness and variation which is regularly superseded by a powerful and strong iambic movement. The effect of inevitability becomes stronger each time, until the final lines of the last stanza, which have the quality of a charm.

There is, however, a contrast of effect between the rhythmic movement of the verse, impressive in the subtlety of its patterning, and the visual imagery of the poem, which is not only hard to fix into a landscape pattern but is constantly contracting and expanding in the mind, moving between pictures of an objectively visible scene and suggestions of vast unseizable subterranean spaces and forces.

As a result, the reception of the poem will vary according to the degree of submission to its more ‘enchancing’ aspects. One can allow one’s mind to be taken over by its rhythm, while contemplating the shifting landscapes described and suggested as one might in a dream. As soon as the conscious mind takes over, on the other hand, questions will begin to pose themselves. It will then become obvious that the poem also has the arbitrariness and reductive economy of much dream work. The fact that a Greek river is flowing through a Tartar landscape, with an Abyssinian maid somewhere in the background, may not be particularly troubling, for the mind can deal easily with such superpositions; but the ‘sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice’ may seem all too convenient and rounded a package for the amount of symbolic freight that it seems by then to be carrying. We know from Coleridge’s notebooks that he had been attracted by the account of an image of ice in an Indian cave which waxed and waned in accord with the waxing and waning of the moon—a marvellous piece of symbolism for correspondences of process between nature and the human mind; but since this idea is not presented in the text of the poem itself it cannot be explored except by subsequent association. Equally, we may suspect that the genius of the last stanza is, like other such figures, standing on a mountain top, and that somewhere in that landscape there is a self-renewing spring of inspiration to counter the disordered fountain of stanza two—but again these are elements to be inferred by the reader from clues such as the honey-dew, not to be found directly presented in the text. At such points, therefore, we glimpse that this poem is inviting a different reading from those to which modern criticism usually points us—a reading which will treat the language of the poem as a threshold which we cross to enter into a imaginative world corresponding to Coleridge’s own at the time when he wrote the poem. That world is constructed partly in alignment with mythological symbolisms which Coleridge himself had been exploring; but it is also in intimate relationship with the landscapes of the writers who meant most to him when he was thinking in visionary terms. To explore the poem to its depths, therefore, is to become aware of various poetical languages: some largely symbolic, arising from the mythological constructions of previous civilizations, some verbal, echoing relevant passages in writers whom Coleridge valued. As the poet’s work is done, all play together in a structure which is larger than that of the presented text.

## THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH AND SYMBOL

The text of the Crewe manuscript<sup>1</sup> ... is the closest we have to that of “Kubla Khan” as it was originally written down. For the purpose of the present discussion I shall assume that original writing took place during a walking tour to the Valley of Rocks in the late autumn of 1797, and that when he composed it Coleridge was in a state of less than complete consciousness. I have elsewhere<sup>2</sup> presented the case for making such assumptions and attempted a reconstruction of the conversations that might have taken place between Wordsworth and Coleridge as they left Porlock and passed through the woods beyond (specifically mentioned by Dorothy Wordsworth in a letter on that occasion), emerging from time to time to see splendid views across



the Bristol Channel to the mountains of Wales. Issues of life and death might well have preoccupied them as they observed and discussed the country around them and perhaps began evolving ideas for the landscape of seasonless death in *The Wanderings of Cain*. The rocks lying scattered in the Valley of Stones, equally, might have directed their minds to the destructive power of the earth, resisting all attempts to recreate an earthly paradise. And so (to continue the reconstruction) when Coleridge was taken ill on the return journey and retired to a lonely farmhouse, the scene was set for a meditation on the nature of earthly powers, whether in the world outside or within the individual.

One other point may be noted. If the retirement was to Ash Farm, the place that fits Coleridge's description best, it was an area of unusual magnificence, from which the enclosed valley which surrounds Culbone stretches down to the sea.<sup>3</sup> It is even possible that Coleridge knew something of the history of the place: how Ash Farm, along with the vale as a whole, had been repossessed in the middle of the eighteenth century by its owner, who had proceeded to cultivate it. Earlier it had been for many years a place of banishment, for lepers and others, and then inhabited by discharged servants from India, who moved about it burning charcoal for the rising metal industries of the country. English charcoal-burners were still at work there in the late 1790s.<sup>4</sup> To this day it is an unusually peaceful and even magical place—even though it differs in equally obvious ways from the language of Coleridge's poem.

But whatever the effect of the actual visible landscape on Coleridge's mind as he came to compose his poem, there can be no doubt that other landscapes were already there, imprinted during his reading of mythology and travel and associated with his more esoteric speculations. Indeed if Coleridge's retirement to the lonely farmhouse took place during the return from the November visit to the Valley of Rocks, at a time when the two poets were actively planning *The Wanderings of Cain*, it would also be natural to suppose (in view of the philological habits of mythologists at that time)<sup>5</sup> that Coleridge's sight of the words 'In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace'<sup>6</sup> evoked an immediate connection between Can and Cain. And in that case a number of connections in the poem become more readily explicable. For Cain is a natural emblem of the daemon in humanity turned to destruction. As the son of Adam in whom the Fall is realized, he knows that all men must now die; although he has never experienced Paradise he has learned what it was like and knows that he cannot regain it. The desperation of his plight is displayed both in the murder of his brother and in subsequent attempts to recreate lost paradise. In eighteenth-century lore, it was commonly supposed that the widespread cults of sun-worship and enclosures sacred to the sun had been initiated by Cain and his descendants in their attempts to recreate the Eden that had been lost. Later, in the persons of Tubalcain and his descendants, the enterprise became centred in the working of metals, with all the ambiguity implied by an activity that could involve the making either of weapons or of agricultural implements—or for that matter of musical instruments.<sup>7</sup> As the activity of creation goes on, sometimes manic in its intensity, the ultimate aim is always to recreate and repossess a former state of wholeness—a state which, though lost, is still sensed in the subconscious.

With the central myth of Cain and his ambiguous activities, two further mythological strains can be connected. The first is the myth of Isis and Osiris, in which the idea of the lost glory is further elaborated into the loss of Osiris and the usurpation of the sun by the destructive Typhon, while Isis undertakes incessant wanderings in the hope of recreating her lover. If Osiris were ever to be recreated by Isis Typhon would be vanquished and disappear, but since she cannot discover his virile member, her work must always be defeated, her unsuccessful quest being imaged in the waxing and waning of the moon. So the world remains trapped between the workings of a destructive sun and a deprived moon which reaches the form of plenitude only to lose it again. Were Osiris to be revived, on the other hand, the world would be dominated by a sun that united heat and light creatively, as imaged in the figuration of sun-gods such as Apollo, deity of healing and music.

The dialectic implicit in the Osiris and Isis myth (for it is the heat of Typhon and the light of Isis that would be blended in the restored Osiris) becomes focussed on the male-female relationship in the myth of Alpheus and Arethusa. There was an enclosure sacred to the sun by the river Alpheus in Greece, but the main myth

connected with Alpheus himself was of his search for the nymph Arethusa: when he rediscovered her they rose up blended in the Arethusa fountain in Sicily.<sup>8</sup>

Once the running together of these myths and others is seen to provide the main structure of meaning in the poem, it becomes possible to understand how a Tartar paradise can associate so readily with a Greek sacred river. The paradisaical imagery in the remainder of the first stanza may also be seen as precisely apt—for most of the elements mentioned, the sacred river, the enclosure, the incense-bearing trees and the sunny spots—are traditionally associated with sun-worship.<sup>9</sup> In the second stanza, by contrast, all that is ambivalent in such traditions comes to the fore: the fountain is destructive, the woman is separated from the daemon-lover who still attracts her, nature is distorted and humanity doomed to war. A miraculous reconciling of the various elements—fire and ice, earth and water, sunny dome and cave of ice, river of life and sea of death, is imaged in the music created by the echo of the fountain in the cave—but imaged only. It is not until the final stanza that the possibility of a true reconciliation is glimpsed in the figure of the restored sun-god who reconciles everything into harmony. The Abyssinian maid can be identified as a priestess of Isis, Abyssinia being the abode of secret wisdom as well as the site of the Nile springs. The poet creating his dome in air reminds us of Apollo, building with his music a temple that all could see.<sup>10</sup> But although the scene closes with the genius having tasted paradisaical elements of honey-dew and milk (suggesting the original paradisaical spring of which all earthly fountains are pale copies), there is still a wistfulness in ‘Could I revive within me ...’: the scene figures an aspiration, not an accomplished fact. In one sense the poem ends triumphantly, for the images of honey-dew and milk consummate the various streams of mythological imagery involved, including the food of the Old Testament Messiah who will redeem man from Cain’s condition as well as that of many pagan gods.<sup>11</sup> There is also however insubstantiality in a vision that seems to last only so long as the musician is there to make it and convince his audience. The concluding sense is of harmony, not of loss, but that harmonization is shot through with fragility.

I have written at greater length about this elsewhere, bringing together more evidence for the establishing of such mythological links, and for Coleridge’s knowledge of the traditions involved. I have also argued that the various ideas are further held together by the imagery and lore of genius, that favorite eighteenth-century theme, so that when we think of sun and moon or of spring and river, we are really looking at aspects of the daemonic, where constructive and destructive factors are working together in creation or falling apart in destructiveness and loss. With the aid of such interlinking themes, I have argued, Coleridge was able to bring together some of the issues that he had been contemplating in his more esoteric investigations, presenting back to himself a satisfying image of his own aspirations. Such lore as I have come across since I first wrote on the subject has helped to support and further delineate this pattern. A possible strand which I had overlooked was pointed out by Richard Gerber, who drew attention to the resemblance between Cybele (Kubele) in Greek mythology and Cubla (Kubla).<sup>12</sup> The sight of Cubla’s first name, he suggests, might well have aroused this run of imagery, also, in Coleridge’s mind. Cybele is earth-goddess, but an earth-goddess associated rather with destruction than with growing; the cults of priests devoted to her drove themselves into frenzies; her common depiction was with a crown of walls and towers, suggesting military defence. If the disorders of the second stanza are seen as evidences of her powers maniacally and destructively in action, her presence not only gives another dimension to the ‘walls and towers’ that Kubla decrees but adds to the suggestion of sun-worship the need to propitiate fearful elements in earthly nature. The combination of Cybele and Cain in the name of Cubla Can would thus initiate the crosscurrents of self-assertion and vengeance in the poem still more vigorously.

In all these ways the poem emerges as a structure of images and symbols by which a complex interpretation of human experience—and especially of the daemonic element in that experience—is being suggested. Yet this perception does not give us the whole poem. To some degree the images clothe themselves naturally in Coleridge’s words, yet we are some way from seeing why particular patterns of language and metre and particular choices of words should have emerged. The discussion so far assumes that Coleridge’s mythological interests did not begin when he sat down to write his poem but had long been a feature of his thinking. When,

after all, he had claimed to his brother at the age of eighteen, 'I may justly plume myself that I first have drawn the nymph Mathesis from the visionary caves of abstracted idea, and caused her to unite with Harmony. The firstborn of this Union I now present to you ...', he was already exploring imagery which reappears in the last stanza of "Kubla Khan" (*CL*, i, p. 7). This was not the only language he had learned to speak, however: he had also been devouring and assimilating the work of previous poets and writers who worked in similar ways. Their language can be seen behind his, evidencing a series of poetic relationships, some intimately detailed, others strong but general, which call for further examination.

To carry it out will involve the pursuit of literary echoes, in a manner that has been much used in connection with "Kubla Khan." There is a well-known tradition for such studies, established by John Livingston Lowes, whereby one finds a previous use of a striking word (which is then printed in italics) [I shall do this myself and to avoid confusion silently suppress italics in the original texts.] and presents it in connection with the corresponding line in "Kubla Khan," where the word is also italicized.<sup>13</sup> (In Lowes's case, however, one finds that many of the usages he cites could be duplicated several times from other travel-books, so that cases he notes often prove simply to be striking instances of a more general imagery.)

I have discussed elsewhere some of the problems raised by this kind of work, pointing out the hazards of trying to establish with precision rules for pursuing influences from one work to another, but also proposing as a simple rule of thumb that coincidence is less likely to be at work if one can trace a phrase rather than a single word, or if a number of echoes from a previous writer rather than a single one, seem to be at work.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, I concentrate here on authors who are known to have impressed Coleridge deeply in youth, and look for clusters of usage rather than single, isolated words. It is a further element among my assumptions that where such words recur what is likely to be at work is not just a simple distinguishable 'echo' but a whole context, informing particular words with recollection of the larger matrix of meaning in which they originally appeared. There is always a danger that such arguments will become circular, obviously, but readers who care to check my method by looking up important words in writers not mentioned will find it harder than they may expect to establish rival patterns of previous usage. Shakespeare, for instance, uses many of the words to be found in the poem, yet I have traced in his work no pattern or cluster of usages that is particularly significant for "Kubla Khan."

## THE LANGUAGE OF GENIUS AND SENSUOUSNESS

Insofar as the symbolism of "Kubla Khan" can be seen to bring together various strands of mythology and traditions of interpretation from the past, its interest is inevitably limited for a modern reader, who has ceased to assign supreme authority to the Bible as a historical record. In such terms it may look at best like the poetry of an inspired comparative mythology, written by a happier Mr. Casaubon. But there is more to the matter than that. Just as Blake at this time was trying to forge a new mythology for his age to replace what he thought of as an outworn and discredited Christianity, Coleridge valued the myths of antiquity less for themselves than for what they suggested about the further possibilities of human creativity. They were to be read as embodying perennial traditions of human inspiration, of genius.

As such, these ideas had already had a long history in Coleridge's mind. They can be associated for example with his general interest in romance as a whole—an interest which had begun as a child with his early absorption in the *Arabian Nights*, and continued apparently throughout the reading of his childhood and youth, taking in first the popular fiction of the time such as *Tartarian Tales* and then, in adolescence, imaginative philosophers such as the Neoplatonists and visionary mystics such as Jacob Boehme.<sup>15</sup>

When we turn to Coleridge's earlier poems we find many examples of words and images that look forward to his most visionary poem, but we also notice a particularly significant cluster around the year 1793. This had been a year both of pleasure and disaster for Coleridge. The trial of William Frend in the Senate House had been an exciting event in Cambridge, followed by a Long Vacation in the West Country where he had enjoyed

some lively company. It was then, probably, that he helped prepare for the Society of Gentlemen in Exeter the paper (described in *Biographia Literaria*)<sup>16</sup> in the course of which he compared Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden* to the Russian palace of ice, 'glittering, cold and transitory', and 'assigned sundry reasons, chiefly drawn from a comparison of passages in the Latin poets with the original Greek, from which they were borrowed, for the preference of Collins's odes to those of Gray.' His attitude to Erasmus Darwin was not one of complete dismissal of course: for years afterwards his poems would be touched by images that he had come across in the *Botanic Garden*, while *Zoönomia* would help stimulate his thinking about the nature of life.<sup>17</sup> Rather, Coleridge was seeking to extend Darwin's achievement, to find a way of writing about scientific matters in verse which would reconcile them with other themes: theology, politics, the human mind. Evidences of this quest can be found both in his reading and in his early poetry. At times, however, it was the quality of the aspiration itself, as celebrated by his more rhapsodic poetic predecessors, that possessed him. Already in 1748 there had appeared Thomson's *Castle of Indolence*, in which the bard roused those who would listen with the strings of his harp, 'The which with skilful touch he deftly strung, / Till tinkling in clear *symphony* they rung ....' With the aid of the muses he had then sung to the ten thousands thronging mute around him a song which included the invocation,

'Come to the beaming God your hearts unfold!  
 Draw from its fountain life! 'Tis thence alone  
 We can excel. Up from unfeeling mould  
 To seraphs burning round the Almighty's throne,  
 Life rising still on life in higher tone  
 Perfection forms, and with perfection bliss ...'

(ii, xlviii)

This sublimated sun-worship was matched by the elevation given to the divine intelligence by Mark Akenside, whose *Pleasures of Imagination* had appeared in its first version a year or two before. In both versions appeared the lines,

From Heav'n my strains begin: from Heaven descends  
 The flame of genius to the human breast,  
 And love, and beauty, and poetic joy,  
 And inspiration.

(i, 55-8)

—to be followed by a long account of the ways in which the human mind could pursue the heavenly intelligence into all its intricate paths of creation. Nature had a particularly central part to play: to quote the first version,

Must fire the chosen genius; Nature's hand  
 Must point the path, and imp his eagle-wings,  
 Exulting o'er the painful steep, to soar  
 High as the summit; there to breathe at large  
 Æthereal air, with bards and sages old ...

Nature's kindling

(i, 37-42)<sup>18</sup>

In the first version, the aged sage Harmodius teaches the poet about the secrets of the universe, recalling a visionary experience in which the 'Genius of human kind' appeared before him in heavenly radiance. After the first pleasurable landscape there was a change of scene:

A solitary prospect, wide and wild,

Rushed on my senses. 'Twas a horrid pile  
Of hills with many a shaggy forest mixed,  
With many a sable cliff and glittering stream.

The long description which follows contains few verbal parallels with the second stanza of “*Kubla Khan*,” yet there is a distinct resemblance of emblematic form, particularly in the movement from rough energetic water to calm stream:

Down the steep windings of the channeled rock  
Remurmuring, rushed the congregated floods  
With hoarser inundation; till at last  
They reached a glassy plain, which from the skirts  
Of that high desert spread her verdant lap,  
And drank the gushing moisture, where confined  
In one smooth current, o'er the liliated vale  
Clearer than glass it flowed.

In this vale, protected by the cliffs above, the sage also saw another sight:

I spied a fair pavilion, which diffused  
Its floating umbrage 'mid the silver shade  
Of osiers.

As he looks at this scene, the sage sees a shaft of sunlight and learns that the pavilion, with its shadow on the waters, is ‘the primeval seat / Of man’, designed as a place where human youth can grow up nurtured by the goddess of wisdom—who is accompanied in turn by another goddess, the fair Euphrosyne. When the goddess of wisdom discovers that the young man is in fact attracted only to her companion she complains to the father-god, who replaces Euphrosyne with an avenging demon; the young man almost despairs. At this point, however, his goddess intervenes: he feels her inspiration ‘Vehement, and swift / As lightning fires the aromatic shade / In Æthiopian fields’, and with her help is roused to do combat; at once Euphrosyne appears again, promising never to leave him:

She ended; and the whole romantic scene  
Immediate vanished; rocks, and woods, and rills,  
The mantling tent, and each mysterious form ...

The sage awakes to be instructed by the moral of what he has seen: happiness will always accompany virtue—but only so long as virtue is followed for herself alone.<sup>19</sup>

The landscape, it must be repeated, bears little relation in strict verbal terms to that described in “*Kubla Khan*.” occasional ‘rills’ and ‘rocks’ feature in many other such passages. But in its general form, its pitting of savage scene against paradisaal plain, its rough waters and calm waters and its general moral that pleasure, if pursued directly for itself, will give rise to an avenging demon, whereas the following of virtue will be accompanied by true inspiration, it bears a strong resemblance to the structure of Coleridge's poem.

Coleridge knew Akenside well by 1796, voicing admiration then for his combination of ‘head and fancy’; his own philosophical poetry bears the touch of his influence at many points. He also imitated him in a poem dated tentatively in 1794, and it seems likely that he already knew him by 1793. In that year, however, his chief poetic heroes seem to have been the two figures mentioned in the *Biographia*: Gray and Collins.

Collins, certainly, was figuring strongly in his consciousness then: after he had met Miss Fanny Nesbitt while travelling in a coach, he had addressed several poems in his style to her. One of them, *On presenting a Moss Rose to Miss F. Nesbitt*, was actually written on the back flyleaves of a copy of Collins's *Poetical Works*.<sup>20</sup>

His devotion that summer is further demonstrated by the poetic texture of his 'Songs of the Pixies.' The lines which begin the fifth section, for instance,

When Evening's dusky car  
Crown'd with her dewy star  
Steals o'er the fading sky in shadowy flight ...

condense various lines in Collins's 'Ode to Evening', such as

The Pensive Pleasures sweet  
Prepare thy shadowy Car

and

Thy Dewy fingers draw  
The gradual dusky Veil ...

The 'fading sky' echoes Gray's *Elegy*, 'Now fades the glimmering landscape ...' and Gray is actually quoted in the line, 'A youthful Bard "unknown to fame".'

Both Gray and Collins seem to be echoed in "*Kubla Khan*." As John Ower has pointed out,<sup>21</sup> Gray's *Progress and Poesy*, which begins with an invocation to the 'Aeolian lyre', continues with a description of poetry imaged as a river:

From Helicon's harmonious springs  
A thousand rills their mazy progress take:  
The laughing flowers, that round them blow,  
Drink life and fragrance as they flow.  
Now, the rich stream of music winds along  
Deep, majestic, smooth, and strong,  
Thro' verdant vales, and Ceres's golden reign:  
Now rowling down the steep amain,  
Headlong, impetuous, see it pour:  
The rocks, and nodding groves rebellow to the roar.

Elsewhere in Gray's poem there is also a reference to fields 'where *Maeander's* amber waves / In lingering Lab'rinth creep.' The landscape is not so close as in Akenside's poem, however, nor are the verbal reminiscences overwhelmingly convincing, since they could easily be matched elsewhere in the poetry of the period. The two most impressive elements are the fine management of the poetical movement and the use of such a landscape to describe not simply genius, but poetic genius. Coleridge was no doubt aware of Dr Johnson's harsh criticism of these lines in his *Lives of the Poets* (1781), but whatever common sense might say he was also likely to be touched by the seductive charms of their rhetoric. The attractiveness of Collins is displayed in a letter of 1796 to John Thelwall:

Now Collins' Ode on the poetical character—that part of it, I should say, beginning with—"The Band (as faery Legends say) Was wove on that creating Day," has inspired & whirled *me* along with greater agitations of enthusiasm than any the most *impassioned* Scene in Schiller or Shakespeare ... Yet I consider the latter poetry as more valuable, because it gives *more general* pleasure—& I judge of all things by their Utility.—I feel strongly, and I think strongly; but I seldom feel without thinking, or think without feeling.

(CL, i, p. 279)

The poet who could write that had evidently been very powerfully drawn by Collins and in fact the lines he mentions have a close relevance to the ending of “Kubla Khan.” Published in 1747, they take to a further stage the imagery of genius projected by Akenside. Poetry is seen as having been born when the Creator, having made the world, retired with Fancy:

Seraphic Wires were heard to sound,  
Now sublimest Triumph swelling,  
Now on Love and Mercy dwelling;  
And she, from out the veiling cloud,  
Breath'd her magic Notes aloud.  
And Thou, Thou rich-hair'd Youth of Morn,  
And all thy subject Life was born! (22)

This image of a goddess inspiring with her song is followed by a concluding section, in which Milton is portrayed as the poet to have fulfilled the ideal of poetic genius, in a career never to be repeated by anyone else. By a neat stroke he is projected into a paradisaal scene like that which he himself created—an Eden which lies high on a rocky cliff, guarded by ‘holy *Genii*.’ I have quoted the lines elsewhere<sup>23</sup> and there is no point in trying to condense them, since it is not particular verbal resemblances that are in question here but the movement as a whole. Collins's verse, like Coleridge's, takes on the inevitability of an incantatory chant which undermines the sense of what is being said: a repetition of the miracle by which the inspired poet, hearing his ‘native strains’ from Heaven, reproduced them for his hearers is being pronounced impossible, but the ecstatic movement of the poem does not altogether confirm the pessimism of the statement.

The figure of the inspiring female and the inspired poet in his elevated paradise are clearly of significance for the final stanza of Coleridge's poem—the movement of which is still less ready to affirm the impossibility of regaining it. It is in another poem of Collins's, however, that we find the closest resemblances to Coleridge's poem. John Livingston Lowes long ago noted the significance of the singing of Melancholy as described in ‘The Passions’:

And dashing soft from Rocks around  
Bubbling Runnels join'd the Sound;  
Thro' Glades and Glooms the mingled Measure stole,  
Or o'er some haunted Stream with fond Delay,  
Round an holy Calm diffusing,  
Love of Peace, and lonely Musing,  
In hollow Murmurs died away. (24)

While the ‘mingled Measure’ gives Coleridge a key phrase for his third stanza, the movement of the lines as a whole contributes to the close of the second. Influences can be traced still further, in fact, since behind Collins's ‘Thro' Glades and Glooms the mingled Measure stole’ one may discern the shape of Dryden's ‘*Through all the compass of the notes it ran*’). Coleridge's ‘Thro' Wood and Dale the sacred river ran’ sounds even closer to Dryden than to Collins, but whereas Dryden then moves to a powerful succeeding line: ‘The diapason closing full in Man’, Coleridge, like Collins, allows the movement to pass to an indeterminate close, the ‘died away’ of Collins being matched by his own ‘sunk in tumult to a lifeless ocean.’ (We may also note in passing, as another possible echo of Dryden, the line that ends a section in Wordsworth's ‘School Exercise’ (1784-5): ‘Through all my fame the pleasing accents ran.’)<sup>25</sup>

The subversive attractions of Collins were the effects of a sensuousness not altogether afraid of itself. Collins's delight in the oriental, similarly, found an echo in Coleridge's love of Eastern tales. Many resemblances can be traced between these exotic stories and details in Coleridge's poem—indeed, given its subject-matter, it would be surprising if they could not—the most striking occurring in the writings of an author who (though Coleridge may not have known it) was imitating Eastern tales rather than translating them. It was James Ridley's *Tales of the Genii* (the very title of which would appeal to that genius-haunted

age) that seem to have engaged his imagination most fully. Ridley's book contained a convincing analogue for Kubla's dome of pleasure: the Genius of Riches produces for the delight of the merchant Abudah a dome which shines so brightly that he can hardly look in its direction—a dome of gold with pillars of precious stones, with intermediate spaces of crystal, so that the inside of the dome can be seen from every direction.

In such tales, however, the proposal of pleasure is usually ominous. When Hassan Assar, Caliph of Baghdad, found himself in a delightful wooded landscape and met a beautiful houri, they leapt to embrace one another, but as they did so were divided by a 'dismal *chasm*.' And while they stood on either side, 'viewing the horrid fissure and the dark abyss', 'wild notes of strange uncouth warlike music were heard from the bottom of the pit.' The moral of the event is the same as in Akenside's natural paradise: the caliph is told that it has happened because he had allowed himself to be over-influenced by 'the outward appearance of things.' Abudah, similarly, had been taken through a beautiful landscape, with woods of spices and perfumes breathing sweetness over the cool stream as the boat followed 'the *meanders* of the current'; but when he tried to open a chest in the centre of the temple the scene turned to darkness and destruction: the ruins of the temple falling in '*huge fragments*' while those who survived ran to and fro in despair, tearing each other to pieces.<sup>26</sup>

However attractive the siren voices of pleasure, whether in Collins's cadences or in the attractions of Eastern romance, their appearance signalled danger. The pursuit of pleasure was likely to be followed by an unhappy turn of fate. And even if Coleridge escaped the tentacles of this idea for a time during the summer of 1793, with its agreeable flirtations and poetic effusions, they re-enfolded themselves all too firmly around him just after. When he returned to Cambridge he was already beset by debts; there are also suggestions of amorous adventures with women of the town. All would be redeemed, he trusted, when he again won the medal for Greek verse which he had already gained the year before. 'Astronomy' being the set subject he made it the occasion for an effusion on genius, portraying Newton as a scientific discoverer with all the trappings of inspired genius, gazing into the spring of creative energy and inebriated by the 'holy ecstasy' that seized him.<sup>27</sup> The conclusion expressed his aspiration to join Newton in the celestial ranks of genius.

Unfortunately, however, he was not awarded the prize, and with the failure his financial embarrassments became overwhelming, so that he ran away to London. There still remained in the tradition of romance that further turn of fortune by which the victim might after all find himself transformed suddenly into a position of power. When the merchant Abudah had been overtaken by the catastrophe described earlier, he had passed into the 'dungeon of lust' from which he was able to rise only with great difficulty; yet when he finally managed to complete the long cavernous ascent he suddenly found himself on top of a mountain, acclaimed as their sultan by the voices of ten thousand.<sup>28</sup> Coleridge, likewise, was evidently hoping for a magical event which would transform his fortunes into prosperity. With the little money he had left he bought a ticket in the lottery, but the stroke of luck he hoped for eluded him. In despair, he volunteered for the army, where he stayed until rescued by his brothers.<sup>29</sup>

The disaster of late 1793 had been a chastening experience, and Coleridge was never to be carried away so fully again. Henceforward it would be his stated preference to combine feeling with thought and to choose the useful in preference to the attractive. Yet the very existence of "Kubla Khan" is a witness to the hold over his imagination which the poetry of genius and the arts of Eastern romance still retained. Among other things, this is a poem about sensual pleasure—including erotic pleasure: the delights of vision, sounds and scents in the first stanza convey suggestions such as those which are overtly expressed in the Song of Solomon, where the bride describes herself as a wall, her breasts like towers, and promises to be a spice-laden garden to her lover.<sup>30</sup> The second stanza likewise suggests the disorders of lust (the working of grievous sexual energies, emblemized in the rough chasm and violent fountain, is made manifest in the woman wailing for her daemon-lover). The figure of genius in the last stanza, similarly, is recognizably an inspired lover, resembling the lover who in the Song of Songs comes into his garden to gather myrrh and spice, to eat honeycomb with honey and to drink wine with milk. It seems likely, as Lowes suggested, that when Coleridge read of Kubla's



paradise garden in Purchas's *Pilgrimage*, he was reminded of the false paradise of Alcadine, described just before the parallel passage in Purchas's *Pilgrimes*, with its pipes that ran with 'Wine, *milke*, *Honey*, and cleere Water' and 'goodly *Damosels* skilfull in *Songs* and Instruments of *Musicke* and Dancing.'<sup>31</sup> With such images in the background it is hardly surprising that Coleridge should write of his mountain of inspiration first as 'Mount Amora', changing it to Milton's Amara only when the censor of his consciousness had time to intervene. The pleasures of sensuousness, which had been tantalizing him before the disaster of 1793, had by no means lost their hold on his unconscious mind.

However, the effluxions of an unchecked libido are not sufficient to account for the poem's language, either. Other echoes inhabit the garden.

## THE LANGUAGE OF COLLABORATION

Coleridge had not been alone in finding 1793 a momentous year. While he had been enjoying the doomed pleasures of that summer and autumn Wordsworth had been enjoying different pains and pleasures, to be recalled in *Tintern Abbey*. During that summer, at a time when his sensuous response to nature was acute ('The sounding cataract haunted me like a passion') he had been beset by gloomy thoughts as he saw British ships preparing for war off the Isle of Wight. Passing across Salisbury Plain, with its Druidic remains, he had been haunted by a Hardy-like sense that the patterns of human creativity and violence must always repeat themselves, so that hopes raised by the French Revolution were bound to be illusory. He had comforted himself a little by recollection of the Druids' more benevolent activities, but it was not until he passed into the Wye Valley and saw a different kind of scenery, one which seemed to impress itself irresistibly on the human consciousness, that he had felt more reassured. Perhaps, after all, there was a hidden force in nature that was working for humanity's amelioration.<sup>32</sup>

In the autumn of 1797, the convergence between Wordsworth and Coleridge reached its closest point. For the first and only time they actually planned to write poetry together: *The Wanderings of Cain* and (when that idea failed) "The Ancient Mariner" (*PW*, i, p. 287). The ensuing year was marked by shared observations, enthusiastic discussions and interlinking speculations, in the course of which Wordsworth's powers became steadily more manifest. Although Coleridge's intelligence was essential to the inspiration of Wordsworth at this time, he constantly assigned to his friend the dominating place. 'The giant Wordsworth!' is a typical phrase (*CL*, i, p. 391).

If we accept that "Kubla Khan" is a poem about genius it becomes natural to ask whether Wordsworth's genius, affirmed so enthusiastically by Coleridge, was not also a presence in the poem. And here it is relevant to recall the distinction which appears in some of Coleridge's later works between two different forms of genius: 'commanding' genius and 'absolute' genius (*BL*, i, pp. 31-3). The man of commanding genius was one whose genius was directed primarily outwards: he might be the man of power who would direct the making of a great harbour, or an aqueduct that brought water to the desert, or lay out a great palace, temple or landscape garden. Such men were however at the mercy of circumstance—to quote Wordsworth, they

obeyed the only law that sense

Submits to recognize; the immediate law,  
From the clear light of circumstances, flashed  
Upon an independent Intellect.(33)

In less propitious times, therefore, they would emerge as the agents of destruction, becoming the war makers, the mighty hunters of mankind. Men of absolute genius, by contrast, can 'rest content between thought and reality, as it were in an intermundium of which their own living spirit supplies the *substance*, and their imagination the ever-varying *form*' (*BL*, i, p. 32). Applying this formula back to "Kubla Khan," it will be evident that it expresses well the distinction between the kind of genius displayed by Kubla Khan in the first

two stanzas and that of the inspired genius in the last. It can also be seen as relevant to Wordsworth himself: a man of considerable powers who had considered joining the Girondist cause in France and so been in danger of devoting those powers to the cause of violent warfare (—and who, for that matter, had left there a woman enslaved by love for him). At the time when Coleridge came to know him well, on the other hand, he was devoting himself more and more to works of what might better be called ‘absolute’ genius—works in which he drew on his own inward powers in the hope of exhibiting to other human beings the nature of their own potential creativity. So it is hardly fanciful to read in the development of the poem an account of Wordsworth's own progress. We need turn only to Coleridge's reported description of Wordsworth in the following spring, when he was talking to Hazlitt about his ‘matter-of-factness’:

His genius was not a spirit that descended to him through the air; it sprung out of the ground like a flower, or unfolded itself from a green spray, on which the gold-finch sang. He said, however (if I remember right), that this objection must be confined to his descriptive pieces, that his philosophic poetry had a grand and comprehensive spirit in it, so that his soul seemed to inhabit the universe like a palace, and to discover truth by intuition, rather than by deduction.

(‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, *H Works*, xvii, p. 17)

We might equally recall his description of Wordsworth in a notebook some years later in October 1803:

I am sincerely glad, that he has bidden farewell to all small Poems—& is devoting himself to his great work—grandly imprisoning while it deifies his Attention & Feelings within the sacred Circle & Temple Walls of great Objects & elevated Conceptions ...

(*CN*, i, 1546)

Just as Coleridge at this time had turned away from immediate politics to study the ‘causes of causes’ so Wordsworth was looking into the principles underlying all human behaviour. He was drawn to look for an absolute truth which would, when found, be compulsively clear to all. But while he cherished the dream of writing what Coleridge hoped would be ‘the *first* and only true philosophical poem in existence’ (*CL*, iv, p. 574), a poem which would present and help to solve the riddles of human existence, he was also subject to self-doubt and the fear that his sense of inspiration might be illusory—so that when he began *The Prelude* the ‘Was it for this ... ?’ theme (his own version of ‘Could I revive within me ...’) was at first dominant.<sup>34</sup>

Coleridge's admiration for Wordsworth's strength was not new: it went back to his discovery of *Descriptive Sketches* in 1793, when he had been seized by the power of passages such as the description of the storm. Reading them, he wrote later, he was struck by a vigor which recalled the vegetable processes in which ‘gorgeous blossoms’ rise out of a ‘hard and thorny shell’:

The language was not only peculiar and strong, but at times knotty and contorted, as by its own impatient strength.

(*BL*, i, p. 77)

There is a sense, then, in which “Kubla Khan,” with its pictures of commanding genius in the first two stanzas and of absolute genius in the last, is a poem about the actualities, the vulnerabilities and the potentialities which Coleridge perceived in Wordsworth's powers. In addition, the language of the poem is often very close to that of the early writing of both poets. There is a particularly close relationship to Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches*, for example. As usual we need to be on our guard, since a young poet is likely to be working from the favorite diction of his contemporaries; even so, however, it would be hard to find an eighteenth-century

poem which ran so closely to the vocabulary of “Kubla Khan.” The very opening:

Where there, below, a spot of holy ground ...

contains three key words in Coleridge's poem; the convergences continue—at least in the imagery—when the poet goes on to say that if such a spot could be found it would be in a language where, among other things, ‘murmuring rivers join the song of ev'n', and where

Silence, on her wing of night, o'erbroods  
Unfathom'd dells and undiscover'd woods;  
Where rocks and groves the power of water shakes  
In cataracts, or sleeps in quiet lakes.

(ll. 9-12)

Any reader who cares to trace the parallels between individual words and phrases in “Kubla Khan” and in the writings of the two poets will be struck by the very large number of such convergences. There are points, however, where one or other poet seems to be in the ascendant. In the case of the second stanza, for instance, Wordsworth's usages provide an even closer parallel than Coleridge's. Consider his ‘*deep chasms* troubled by roaring streams’ (*Borderers*, l. 1805), ‘*Slant watery lights*’ (*Evening Walk*, l. 92), light streaming ‘*athwart the night*’ (*Guilt and Sorrow*, l. 144), ‘the full circle of the *enchanted steep*s’ (*Evening Walk*, l. 350), ‘While opposite, the *waning moon* hangs still’ (*Descriptive Sketches*, l. 219). It is the constant appearance of these words in contexts of landscape, and of a landscape made numinous by a juxtaposition of beauty with fear, which makes for this constant sense of connection. It is only at the ‘daemon-lover’ that the relevance of Coleridge's early poetry (e.g. ‘She that worked whoredom with the Daemon Power’ (*Religious Musings*, l. 332)) becomes decidedly more significant.

The inference which might be drawn from this is that Wordsworth's idea of genius stood in the tradition which associates it with feelings of fear and wonder aroused in a numinous landscape, and that Coleridge was aware of the fact, so that when that theme entered “Kubla Khan” it was Wordsworth's poetic language that came most readily to his mind. This effect emerges still more strikingly when we look for points of what might be ‘intensive’ influence—points where there is a cluster of such words. Wordsworth's ‘Were there, below, a *spot of holy ground*’ has already been mentioned.

For an equally intense influence from Coleridge's own verse we should need to turn to his recent *Osorio*, which includes a line describing the ‘innumerable company’ who ‘in broad circle’,

Girdle this round earth in a dizzy motion

(*PW*, ii, p. 551)

‘Girdle’ was probably not in the original manuscript of “Kubla Khan,” as we have seen, but even so we can still find three direct verbal parallels—including the use of ‘this ... earth’ and the striking resemblances between ‘dizzy motion’ and ‘mazy motion.’ If we then look for those words in the poem which had been previously used by Coleridge, but not by Wordsworth, we find words such as ‘incense’, ‘milk’, ‘mazy’ and ‘honeydew’—words, that is, of sensuous pleasure and suggestion. And here, we may legitimately suspect, we are looking at the language of genius that comes more naturally to Coleridge himself from his own past.

To say this is to raise a wider issue. Human beings set to remember objects or sentences are much more likely to remember those which they have already *expressed* in some form.<sup>35</sup> In particular, they remember their own previous *constructions*. We should expect, similarly, that in a poem such as “Kubla Khan” where, as we have seen, the passive side of the artist's mind seems to have been unusually prominent, that which he had done

before would provide a most ready means of expression. Whereas he would be likely to recall Wordsworth's lines in terms of their *significance*, in other words, he would at the same time be treading more widely in his own memory, sometimes producing tangential effects from past poems whether or not there was a bond of significance as well ('dizzy motion'—'mazy motion' is a good example of such a connection: strong in repetition of movement and sound, lighter in terms of actual significance). We should also expect that where parallels of diction and significance concurred there might be a very intensive effect. A good example can be found in his *Monody on the Death of Chatterton*, where Chatterton's inspiration is described in the lines:

See, as floating high in air  
Glitter the sunny Visions fair,  
His eyes dance rapture, and his bosom glows!

(*PW*, i, p. 127)

No less than seven of the strong words in these lines are found in "Kubla Khan," and the congruity of theme goes without saying. If Wordsworth is the master of the numinous wild landscape, Coleridge's voice comes into its own with descriptions of ecstatic poetic inspiration.

Such are the general patterns that seem to emerge from an inspection of earlier usages by Wordsworth and Coleridge that are echoed in the poem. It is also profitable to turn to the various words which had not previously been used by either poet. This list, which is not long, would include such words as *pleasure-dome* (as opposed to *pleasure* and *dome* separately), *measureless* (as opposed to *measure*), *sinuous*, *greenery*, *at once and ever*, *ancestral* and *revive*. First, obviously, we look for evidence of Coleridge's innovatory skills—and we are not disappointed, since the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives no use of 'greenery' before "Kubla Khan;" the idea of reviving *within oneself* looks more sophisticated than the usages recorded there, also (though here we may be on less sure ground). The most unusual word to a modern eye, 'momently', is not in fact a new coinage, but both Coleridge and Wordsworth enjoyed using it afterwards, as we shall see.

The passage which is brought most into prominence when we look for words not previously used by either poet is the one that follows immediately after 'momently was forced':

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail ...

The words previously unused by Coleridge (represented here of course by *lack* of italics) make up a large and distinctive knot within the poem as a whole; and the list (apart from 'flail', which is used rather memorably in 'the *measured* echo of the distant *flail*' in *Descriptive Sketches* l. 770) is shared with Wordsworth. The other striking feature of these lines is their descriptive skill. It is as if when Coleridge moves into representation of energy he manages also to break free of poetic practice, his own and others'. We cannot forget, of course, that the image of threshing is biblical: Isaiah (40: 15) had spoken of the Lord as threshing the mountains and making the hills as chaff, and his imagery had been presented as an example of the biblical sublime by Lowth, whom Coleridge read in 1796.<sup>36</sup> Yet there is also a freshness here, a vivid realization of the images being drawn into service. When Coleridge copies phrases of biblical rhetoric into his notebooks (perhaps as fuel for projected rhetoric) they sometimes look perfervid and overblown; here the phrases have been fully assimilated into verse with a life of its own.

This is the nearest we come to a passage of direct originality in the poem. Elsewhere, as we have seen, Coleridge's originality is to be found working indirectly by way of previous poetic languages—not only Wordsworth's but those of eighteenth-century poets such as Gray and Collins. If we now move still further back, to a poet who stands behind these poets, we may begin to understand more precisely the kinds of pressure from the past that are being exerted on certain particular words and phrases, reminding us of other

and older languages.

## THE LANGUAGE OF LOSS

We have already suggested that the wistfulness towards Milton expressed by poets such as Gray and Collins might prompt a response less despairing than their own. They might mourn the impossibility of ever matching Milton's achievement, yet the very ecstasy of the language in which they did so could prompt a different response: that very language was perhaps waiting to be developed by a new Milton, if one should arise. And was it after all impossible to imagine a poet of equivalent strength? 'What if you should meet in the letters of any then living man, expressions concerning the young Milton ... the same as mine of Wordsworth', wrote Coleridge to Poole in 1800, 'would it not convey to you a most delicious sensation?' (*CL*, i, p. 584). Meanwhile he was cherishing his own dreams of writing an epic poem (*CL*, i, pp. 320-1).

Yet if one tried to array Milton too readily in the singing robes of genius and sensuousness the paradox threatened to come full circle, since he himself, despite his insistence ('On Education', para. 17) that true poetry was 'simple, sensuous and passionate', had imposed severe limits on sensuous indulgence. Unless he went the full course with Blake and decided that Milton himself had erred in his view of pleasure, the young man who hoped to rival him must take on himself the same burden of moral knowledge, the same belief that in every sensuous paradise there must lurk a deadly serpent.<sup>37</sup>

Coleridge always accepted that knowledge, seeing his own life as a constant series of movements between pleasure proposed and guilt supervening. The paradigm is clear enough in *The Eolian Harp*, where, as soon as he has set forth a speculative philosophy which might reconcile sensuous experience with the divine he rebukes himself (through the imagined intervention of Sarah) for such 'unhallowed thoughts' (so, incidentally, invoking the figure of the Lady in *Comus* when she unlocks her lips in 'this unhallowed air' (l. 757)). When he and Sarah enjoyed their married bliss in their Clevedon cottage later on it was with an under knowledge of admonition, a sense first signalled in his poem *Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement* by the passing Bristol 'son of Commerce' who was made to 'muse / With wiser feelings', declaring that it was 'a Blessed Place' (*PW*, i, p. 106). The ironic reference is of course to Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Book Nine passing through Eden like one 'long in populous city pent' before the Fall and looking with muffled envy, 'stupidly good', at the happiness he sees there. For Coleridge, however, the moral points differently, towards himself and Sarah. They will be forced to take on Adam's fate and, in the interests of social responsibility, leave their paradise. The admonitory Miltonic note sounds for them, also.

In "Kubla Khan," likewise, every phrase with an echo of *Paradise Lost* is shot through with plangency of foreknowledge. The very line with which the poem opens recalls Adam, seeing

Of Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Can ...

the destined walls

(ix, ll. 387-8)

—a foresight clouded with the double irony of Adam's knowledge that this will be a post-lapsarian paradise, doomed to decay, and the reader's that, as with the others to be catalogued, that decay has by now been realized.

So with other words in the poem that recall *Paradise Lost*. Likenesses are accompanied by telling differences. If the sacred river recalls the river that flowed through Eden, the actual description of it, progressing through caverns to a sunless sea, is in contrast with Milton's description in Book Four of his river before the Fall, when it divided, part returning to well up again in a spring near the Tree of Life. As Coleridge writes of 'sinuous rills', similarly, we are likely to be reminded that Milton's river-fountain went on to water the garden

‘with many a rill’; the word ‘sinuous’, which had not appeared before in Coleridge’s poetry or Wordsworth’s, was elsewhere used by Milton to describe the worms and serpent-like creatures which for all their attractive coloring were to become pests after the Fall (iv, l. 481).

The undertone of admonition emerges more strongly in the second stanza. The word ‘savage’ occurs during Satan’s entry into Paradise: ‘Now to the ascent of that steep savage hill / Satan had journeyed on’ (iv, ll. 172-3). The ‘cedarn cover’, similarly, recalls his return just before the Fall:

Nearer he drew, and many a walk traversed  
Of stateliest covert, cedar, pine, or palm ...

(ix, ll. 434-5)

—the word ‘cover’ looking forward simultaneously to Adam’s cry after the Fall: ‘cover me ye pines, / Ye cedars, with innumerable boughs, / Hide me, where I may never see me more’ (ix, ll. 1088-90). The woman wailing for her daemon-lover suggests Eve after the Fall—particularly if we recall the rabbinical tradition, known no doubt to both Milton and Coleridge, that the tempting of Eve took the form of actual sexual temptation by Satan<sup>38</sup> (there might also be a distant echo from the temptation of Samson in Milton’s drama, by Delilah, who describes herself ‘*Wailing thy absence in my widowed bed*’).<sup>39</sup>

The remainder of the stanza moves into a pattern which recalls the shape of *Paradise Lost* as a whole. The violent fountain is redolent of the vast destruction during the War in Heaven and the natural disorders after the Fall. When the river that flows from it moves with a mazy motion we recall not merely Gray’s *Progress of Poetry* but Milton’s river, which ‘flowed with mazy error’—the strange foreboding note is sounded once again within a description of Paradise.<sup>40</sup> The ancestral voices prophesying war recall some of the grim visions of the future presented to Adam in the final books of *Paradise Lost*, while the syntactical form of the line recalls the faces that threatened from the walls of Eden as Adam and Eve departed: ‘fierce faces threatening war’ (xi, l. 641).

It is in the last stanza that the presence of *Paradise Lost* is most crucial, for there it intrudes with its admonitory implications on the most ecstatic statements in the poem, importing ambiguity. The most intensive echo comes, as has often been noticed, from the passage where Milton describes the later paradises which were to recall Eden, notably the one

... where Abassin kings their issue guard  
Mount Amara, though this by some supposed  
True Paradise, under the Ethiop line  
By Nilus head ...

(iv, ll. 280-3)

It is peculiarly appropriate that Coleridge’s paradise should, by implication, be situated by the source of another sacred river, the Nile, in view both of the sun/moon, Isis and Osiris imagery in the poem and of the lore surrounding the troglodytes of Abyssinia (including their supposed invention of the dulcimer, a form of lyre).<sup>41</sup> Immediately before that description in Milton’s poem there is another which is also appropriate:

Girt with the river Triton, where old Cham  
Whom Gentiles Ammon call and Lybian Jove,  
Hid Amalthea and her florid son  
Young Bacchus from his stepdame Rhea’s eye ...

(iv, ll. 275-9)

that Ny

It is not simply that the infant Bacchus, as a young divinity, was nurtured on milk and honey, but that Rhea (as Richard Gerber points out) is an alternative name for Cybele, so that the threat from the destructive earth-mother moves in the background of Milton's narrative also.<sup>42</sup> Throughout Milton's description, moreover, we are reminded that these are all false paradises: they may image Eden, but none can actually replace it. The 'symphony and song' may remind us of the 'dulcet symphonies and voices sweet' in Book One of *Paradise Lost*; if so, we are simultaneously reminded that the 'fabric huge ... Built like a temple' which was raised to their sound was none other than Pandemonium, the meeting-place of the devils (i, ll. 710-57). And even when we see the words 'deep delight' we may recall that the nearest parallel in *Paradise Lost* is also admonitory:

But if the sense of touch whereby mankind  
Is propagated seems such dear delight  
Beyond all other, think the same vouchsafed  
To cattle and each beast ...

(viii, ll. 579-82)

At this point a reinforcing echo is provided by that other master of the false paradise, Spenser. When Atin arrives at Acrasia's Bower of Bliss to rouse Cymochles, he finds him surrounded by 'a flock of *Damzelles*', charming him with sensuous pleasures, including 'sweet wordes, dropping like *honny dew*.' He is shocked to see him 'Thus in still waves of *deep delight* to wade' (ii, v, 32.4-35.2). These warning echoes from *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queene* link with the fact that the dome is built 'in air'—not, apparently, on the solid earth.

Although the language of *Paradise Lost* is one of the clearest presences in the poem it speaks with no simple voice: it offers sounds and sights of paradise but in the act reminds, always, that Eden is not to be permanently or totally regained. That alternation between attraction and admonition, each redoubling on the other, contributes strongly to the note of plangency in Coleridge's poem.

The language of *Paradise Lost* is not the only voice of Milton in the poem ..., but the echoes from it, including the trisyllabic Xanadu for 'Xamdu' (probably prompted unconsciously by the sound of Milton's 'Cambalu') and the Amara of the last stanza, are so strong that we do well to attend to them—and to the note that they portend. They point to the deepest division with Coleridge's own psyche and so to the hindrances he experienced as a poet when his moral consciousness was actively in play. ...

## Notes

1. First described in *TLS* (2 Aug 1934), p. 541 and later reproduced photographically in articles by John Shelton, *Review of English Literature* vii (1966), pp. 32-42, and T. C. Skeat *British Museum Quarterly* xxvi (1962-3), pp. 77-83.
2. See my essay 'Poems of the Supernatural', in *S. T. Coleridge*, ed. R. L. Brett, 'Writers and their Background' series (1971), pp. 54-60. For my retention of the four stanza division of "Kubla Khan" used by Coleridge in all editions appearing during his lifetime, see my note in the 1970 reprint of *Coleridge the Visionary*, p. 10.
3. See 'Poems of the Supernatural', p. 60, and D. H. Karrfalt, 'Another Note on "Kubla Khan" and Coleridge's retirement to Ash Farm', *N&Q* ccxi (May 1966), pp. 171-2.
4. See Joan Cooper, *Culbone: A Spiritual History* (Culbone, 1977), pp. 27-36.
5. See e.g. Jacob Bryant, *A New System of an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774-6), and the *Mythological, Etymological and Historical Dictionary* derived from it by William Holwell (1793).
6. Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1617), p. 472.
7. See Berkeley's *Siris*, sect. 187, quoted in *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 119, 218.

8. Ibid., p. 211.
9. Ibid., pp. 216-22.
10. Ibid., pp. 251-5; 262.
11. See passages (including Isaiah 7: 15-4) quoted *ibid.*, pp. 265-6.
12. Richard Gerber, 'Keys to "Kubla Khan"', *English Studies* xlv (1963), pp. 1-21. Since this appeared, Coleridge's familiarity with Cybele has been confirmed by publication of a description in 1805 of rocks, 'once or twice with a Tower like the Head of Cybele' (CN, ii, 2690), and his 1818 reflection that 'in the elder world the Infinite was hidden in the Finite—Every Stream had its Naiad—the Earth its Cybele, the Ocean its Neptune' (CN, iii, 4378, f.3v).
13. Some typical examples are by R. F. Fleissner, who draws attention to the river meandering for several miles to the sea in *Tom Jones* (N&Q ccv (1960), pp. 103-5); S. C. Harrex, who notices the 'dome where Pleasure holds her midnight reign' in Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* (N&Q ccxi (1966), pp. 172-3), and Michael Grosvenor Myer, who notes versions of the ballad *The Daemon Lover*—especially Scott's in 1812 (N&Q ccxxviii (1983), p. 219).
14. See my article 'Influence and Independence in Blake' in *Interpreting Blake*, ed. M. Phillips (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 196-261.
15. See letter to Poole, Oct 1797, CL, i, p. 347, letter of 1815, CL, iv, p. 606, and my *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (1977), pp. 23-32.
16. BL, i, pp. 19-20—where, however, Coleridge dates the paper a year earlier.
17. The echoes of Erasmus Darwin have been noticed by Lowes in *The Road to Xanadu*, pp. 18f, 35f, 94-9, 189f, 464-5, 473, 495; one or two more have been noted by Norman Fruman, *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel*, pp. 243 and 253-4. For *Zoönomia* see my *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence*, pp. 50-7, 74-7.
18. Cf. *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1757), i, ll. 98-102.
19. *The Pleasures of Imagination*, ii, ll. 273-6, 281-8, 292-5, 660-2 (and 175-771 generally).
20. PW, i, pp. 45-6 and n. See W. Braekman, 'The Influence of William Collins on Poems Written by Coleridge in 1793', *Revue des Langues Vivantes* (1965), pp. 228-39.
21. John Ower, 'Another Analogue of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"', N&Q ccxii, p. 294.
22. 'Ode on the Poetical Character', ll. 34-40.
23. *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 258-9.
24. 'The Passions', ll. 62-8 quoted Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*, pp. 399-400. Lowes also mentions Coleridge's project for editing Gray and Collins (see CN, i, 161 (2) and 174 (15)).
25. Dryden, 'Song for St. Cecilia's Day', l. 14; WPW, i, p. 259.
26. James Ridley, *Tales of the Genii*, 1766, i, pp. 51-2, 135-6, 77. Cf. my essay 'Poems of the Supernatural', pp. 65-6.
27. A translation of this by Southey is reproduced in my *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 297-300.
28. *Tales of the Genii*, i, p. 81.
29. See, e.g., Lawrence Hanson, *Life of Coleridge: The Early Years* (1938), pp. 34-40.
30. Song of Solomon 4: 12-15, 16; 8: 10, quoted in *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 270-1.
31. S. Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes* (Glasgow, 1905-7), xi, pp. 208-9. Quoted Lowes, pp. 361-2.
32. For further accounts, with references, see my *Wordsworth in Time* (1979), pp. 43-6, and *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* (1978), pp. 26-36.
33. See Rivers's Speech in *The Borderers*, ll. 1493-6, PW, i, p. 187, partly used again *Prelude* (1805), x, ll. 826-9.
34. *Oxford 'Prelude'*, p. 633. See J. Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 36-8 and nn.
35. For detailed experiments in this field see F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experiential and Social Psychology* (Cambridge, 1932).
36. R. Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*, tr. G. Gregory (1787), i, pp. 148-9. Coleridge borrowed the original Latin edition of 1753 from Bristol Library from 16 to 22 Sept. 1796. *Bristol LB*, p. 123.



37. 'I saw Milton in imagination and ... he wished me to show the falsehood of his doctrine that the pleasures of sex arose from the Fall.' E. J. Morley, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers* (1938), i, p. 330. See also my discussion in *Blake's Humanism* (Manchester, 1968), pp. 31-2.
38. See J. M. Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 48-50.
39. Line 806. A more likely reference is to the wailing for Thammuz: see *Paradise Lost*, i, ll. 446-57.
40. *Paradise Lost*, iv, l. 239. It is also reinforced when Satan resolves to fold himself in the 'mazy folds' of the serpent; *ibid.*, ix, ll. 161-2. Milton's use of 'mazy' in Book Four was no doubt responsible for the extraordinary popularity of the word in eighteenth-century verse.
41. See *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 63, 208, 241, 252f, 342.
42. 'Keys to "Kubla Khan"', pp. 16-17.

#### *Abbreviations*

*BL* S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Engell and W. Jackson Bate, CC vii (2 vols., 1983)

*BLS* S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (2 vols., Oxford, 1907)

*BRH* *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*

*Bristol LB* George Whalley, 'The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge', *Library*, iv (Sept. 1949) pp. 114-31

*CC* *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series lxxv, (London and New York, 1969-)

*CL* *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (6 vols., Oxford, 1956-71)

*CM* S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley, CC xii (5 vols., London and Princeton, N.J., 1980-)

*CN* *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn (6 vols., New York, 1957-73)

*C&S* S. T. Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State, According to the Idea of Each*, ed. J. Colmer, CC x (1976)

*DWJ* *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt (2 vols., Oxford, 1941)

*EC* *Essays in Criticism*

*ELH* *English Literary History*

*EOT* S. T. Coleridge, *Essays on his Times*, ed. D. V. Erdman, CC iii (3 vols., 1978)

*EY* *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn, *The Early Years, 1787-1805*, revised by C. L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967)

*Friend* S. T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. B. Rooke, CC iv (2 vols., 1969)

*H Works* *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (21 vols., 1930-4)

*Lects 1795* S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. L. Patton and P. Mann, CC I (1971)

*LL(M)* *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. Marris (3 vols., New York, 1975-8).

LS S. T. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White, CC vi (1972)

McFarland, 'SI' Thomas McFarland, 'The Origin and Significance of Coleridge's Theory of Secondary Imagination', *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London, 1972), pp. 195-246

Misc C Coleridge's *Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (Cambridge, Mass., 1936)

MLA Modern Language Association of America

M Phil Modern Philology

N&Q Notes & Queries

Norton 'Prelude' William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. J. Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, S. Gill (New York and London, 1979)

Oxford 'Prelude' William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn, revised by H. Darbishire (Oxford, 1959)

P Lects *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn (London and New York, 1949)

PMLA *Publications of the Modern Language Association* (Baltimore, 1886-)

Prose Works *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (3 vols., Oxford, 1974)

PW *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (2 vols., Oxford, 1912)

Sh C Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (2 vols., 1930)

SIR *Studies in Romanticism*

SM S. T. Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual*, ed. R. J. White, CC vi (1972)

TLS *The Times Literary Supplement*

TWC *The Wordsworth Circle*

WPW *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire (5 vols., Oxford, 1940-9)

## Criticism: Ken Frieden (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: Frieden, Ken. "Conversational Pretense in 'Kubla Khan.'" In *Modern Critical Views: Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Harold Bloom, pp. 209-16. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1985, Frieden presents a rhetorical analysis of "Kubla Khan" as it both demonstrates and undercuts Coleridge's conversational poetic mode.]

Coleridge's conversation poems extend the conventions of dramatic soliloquy to an apparently autonomous lyrical form. Dramatic soliloquy and poetic monologue both generate illusions of individual speech, yet the difference in genre has decisive implications. In the dramatic context, soliloquy retains mimetic pretensions as part of a represented world, while the written conversation poem tends to draw attention to its own representational illusion. The poetic monologist is typically less concerned to describe the world than to reflect on the experiences that constitute it.

Coleridge, whose finest lyrics are representative of the Romantic monologue, writes most enthusiastically of Shakespeare's genius in connection with the great soliloquist, Hamlet. Perhaps because Coleridge identifies with Hamlet, monological forms characterize his strongest poems. Although the conversation poem does not inherently carry abnormal associations, the solitude it implies creates an opening for the aberrations of "phantom magic." Coleridge further develops the conversational mode suggested by Shakespearean soliloquy and Augustan poetry and clusters a set of related poems around supernatural phenomena.

The rise and fall of Coleridge's conversational pretense may be traced as a fictional biography, from his identification with Hamlet, through "The Eolian Harp" and "Frost at Midnight," until the subversion of the conversational mode by "Kubla Khan." The multiple voices of "Kubla Khan" disrupt the scene of vision, revealing a potential threat to composition. If Coleridge's early poetry succeeds by virtue of its firm control of the conversational tone, his more radical lyrics disturb the poetic voice that had been established.

## VOICES OF DECAY

"Kubla Khan," the culmination of Coleridge's conversation poems, both employs and destroys the conversational mode. Replete with exclamations that indicate a presumed immediacy of feeling, Coleridge's strongest short poem no longer begins with a corresponding, intimate scene. Rather than present a scene of intimacy as the point of departure for imaginative wanderings, "Kubla Khan" opens with a fantastic landscape of Xanadu. The speaker's present is initially an absence from the poem, a lack that Coleridge's preface counters by describing the conditions of composition. But Coleridge presents a most peculiar scene of composition, in which the words of the poem purportedly accompany private imagery of a dream. On one level, the conversation poems strive to represent commonplace domestic situations, while "Kubla Khan" breaks off its elaborate fantasy in conjunction with a threat of madness.

The prose preface operates as do the opening lines of "The Eolian Harp" and "Frost at Midnight," delineating a place and time of creative activity. Whereas the conversation poems only implicitly represent the moment of writing in their scenes of monologue, the preface explicitly discusses the genealogy of "Kubla Khan." Narrating a scene of interruption, the preface fosters the conception of "Kubla Khan" as "a vision in a dream" that has been only partially recovered by waking memory.

Although prefaces are conventionally more literal than poems, critics have doubted the accuracy of Coleridge's autobiographical data. A naïve reading wishes to accept the preface as an accurate description of the scene of composition, while a more sober reading concludes that it is unreliable. If we recognize preface and poem as equal literary fictions, however, neither half of Coleridge's double text merits special status. Both preface and poem voice a pseudoautobiographical "I," a parallel that unsettles the facile dichotomy between prose and verse as literal (or referential) and figurative (or fictional). Preface and poem unsettle the conventional notions of representational correspondence in different genres. Too marvelous for strict autobiography, but not too literal for fiction, the preface need not depend on a pretension to autobiographical truth.

The preface, "Of the Fragment of Kubla Khan," insistently refers to "the following fragment," emphasizing a part-whole relationship between present words and some unspecified totality. Coleridge denies independent status to the poem "Kubla Khan," perhaps because it breaks the familiar pattern of the conversation poems.

The synecdoche is accompanied by a perspectivizing allusion to “a poet of great and deserved celebrity,” whose estimation of the poem contrasts the author's. Is the fragment great or small, heavy or light? “Fragments” also “vaulted like rebounding hail” in line 21 of the poem, before compared with “chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail.” The *ground* of this literary fragment shows itself to be as unsteady as are the fragments in “that deep romantic chasm” and will not support weightier pretensions. The fragment is published, “as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits” (Pr. 1) [The preface (“Pr.”) is cited by sentence number and the poem (“KK”) by line number as they appear in Coleridge's *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge.] The request of Lord Byron, whose fame appears secure, provides ground for publication, even if not on the basis of “*poetic* merits.”

If “Kubla Khan” is a “psychological curiosity,” the preface further insists on the authenticity of its narrative by citing purportedly real chronology and geography (Pr. 2). Yet Coleridge discusses the poem's “Author” at a distance suggested by the third-person form. The language of cause and effect, illness and cure, add to an impression of necessity in the narrated events: “In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in ‘Purchas's Pilgrimage’: ‘Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall’” (Pr. 3-4). The author reads Kubla's command at the moment when a drug induces sleep, allowing him to evade the problems of conscious borrowing. The poem's allusions are thus casually ascribed to the influence of a virtually unconscious reading rather than to a controlled act of writing. Purchas' words appear to ground Coleridge's fragment more firmly than do “*poetic* merits.” Sleep further frees the author from responsibilities associated with deliberate action: “The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses” (Pr. 5). If Coleridge as dreamer does not consciously control the act of composition, an external-internal opposition gives his creativity the appearance of self-generation.

By describing a three-stage procedure, Coleridge effectively traces “Kubla Khan” to a creative act based on unconscious processes.

Step 1, *dream composition*, is also not composition, because the author “could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (Pr. 5). Can that be called composition “in which all the images rose up before him as *things*”? The previous images of “substance,” “ground,” and “fragment” suggest an affinity between physical and textual realities; here the extraordinarily substantial images may be either visual or poetic. The visionary moment is itself presumably extralinguistic, because Coleridge writes of a “parallel production of the correspondent expressions.” Simultaneous with but not equivalent to the images, the correspondent expressions appear as if naturally or necessarily linked to what they express. Although words suggest themselves in parallel, the narrator indicates that the unusually concrete images are his primary impression. In contrast to this claim, the underlying *poetic* meaning of “images” keeps his “vision” in literary bounds from the start. The ambiguous “image” begins to undo the primary claim of an effortless vision that naturally gives rise to correspondent expressions.

Step 2, *transcription* of the dream composition, follows immediately, when the author “appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved” (Pr. 6). The instantaneous impulse to write implies that the poetic lines precisely reproduce the dreamed expressions. Unlike the prolonged dream period of “about three hours,” the secondary scene of writing condenses into an instant. There is no need to judge whether the fifty-four crafted lines of “Kubla Khan” could actually be instantly or automatically composed: Coleridge's claim to a later, synchronic “recollection of the whole” is an aspect of his double text. The alleged instantaneous scene of writing strives to unify the diachronic process during which “all the images rose up before him as *things*.”

This moment captures the dream sequence as a simultaneous order, admitting no break until the author completes “the lines that are here preserved.”

Step 3, *interruption*, occurs as suddenly as does the transcription. The “moment” of reading already appears in sentence 3 when the author “fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence.” The necessity of a secondary act of reading, or dream interpretation, shows itself with the event of interruption. The published preface eludes any intimation of deliberate craft, however, by reducing the time interval to a moment: “At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour” (Pr. 7). The dream and period of detainment both have measurable durations, but the transcription seems to break off in the midst of its lightning-fast burst. The preface subsequently refers to “the vision” retrospectively; on returning to his room, the author “found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!” (Pr. 7). The mention of dissolving images affirms the independent, picture like quality of an initial vision. But the speaker's subsequent “mortification” establishes a gloomier connection between the fading vision and loss of life: *mortificare* is to cause to die. The interruption of the processes of writing is a symbolic death, especially for the older Coleridge, who knows that he has lost his poetic genius.

As if to revise the preceding simile and derive new assurance, the preface cites ten lines from Coleridge's poem “The Picture.” This allusion is part of the effort to ground “Kubla Khan” visually. A “poor youth” suffers a loss like that of the narrator, and “then all the charm / Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair / Vanishes” (Pr. 8). But for the youth of “The Picture,” in a narcissistic fantasy, natural events restitute what has been lost:

The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon  
The visions will return! ...  
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms  
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more  
The pool becomes a mirror.

[Pr. 9-10]

Coleridge's conversation poems and reading of Hamlet similarly revolve around this quest after a mirror of the self. For the preface narrator, however, the metaphor fails: although he retains “some vague and dim recollection” of the vision, his fragments do not unite. In the narrative that describes the author's dream and transcription, the disruption is nonreversible and does not end in restoration. Falling short of the author's “phantom-world,” the preface only mirrors another text.

The final paragraph of the preface contrasts the author's deliberate intentions and his spontaneous creation: “from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him” (Pr. 11). The author's sleep writing takes on the aura of an inspired moment, “given” by unexplainable forces and inaccessible to conscious intentions. The preface thus claims that “Kubla Khan” is an inspired fragment never resumed after its abrupt interruption. The closing sentence projects a hypothetical future and readership by citing Theocritus' words, “I'll sing to you a sweeter song another day” (later emended to “I'll sing to you a sweeter song tomorrow”). Like the final lines of the poem, this final proleptic awareness combines positive anticipation with a negative moment: “but the to-morrow is yet to come.”

The last stanza of “Kubla Khan” does not appear to derive from the same effortless, unreflective impulse that allegedly produces “the lines that are here preserved.” Thus critics have been as skeptical of the poem's formal unity as doubtful of its genetic unity. Several interpreters consider the poem to be divided into two disparate

parts, before and after the shift to first person in the third stanza. According to the critical cliché, an impersonal voice describes Kubla's pleasure dome and grounds, after which a first-person speaker recalls a past vision, loosely associated with Xanadu. Based on the shift in "vision" that occurs in the last stanza, this received idea ignores the complications of the middle stanza, yet a two-part structure of the poem is commonly admitted.

In the closing lines of the poem, a first-person voice presents an alternative version of origins. Like the preface, these lines interpret the mysteries of vision: "A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw" ("KK" 37-38). Discontinuous with previous descriptions by the first stanza, these words implicate the speaker in his visionary experience and locate the vision at a distinct, past time. The dream is over. No longer speaking as if the forests were "here" and the gardens "there," the nostalgic voice recollects something that is no longer immediately present, even to imagination. The first appearance of Kubla's world emphasizes the visual, but the damsel vision attends to sound:

It was an Abyssinian maid,  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.

[“KK” 39-41]

A new set of proper names displaces Xanadu, Kubla, and Alph. The modified proper names, like the damsel's song, introduce additional words into the vision. As his earlier imaginative scene is superseded, the speaker loses his referential assurance, breaks off his representational pretense, and tries to recall the song of his imaginary figure: the Abyssinian Maid sings of a place, in a referential mode. Rather than strive to regain his attempted correspondence to immediate vision, the speaker gives up his own song in order to seek hers:

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!

[“KK” 42-47]

An imagined recollection of the damsel's music replaces the visions of Xanadu. But the relationship between damsel and dome is mysterious: what does the new vision have in common with the old? If the visions are linked, why is the damsel absent from Kubla's domain? The speaker's imagined damsel, playing her "sweet" instrument, contrasts the "woman wailing" he projects into Kubla's turbulent pleasure grounds. The speaker implicitly acknowledges the instability of poetic constructs when he anticipates building "that dome in air."

As he longs to regain his lost vision, the speaker echoes intentions stated by the preface: "from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him." As in the citation from Theocritus (Pr. 12), completion depends on the existence of an imagined audience: "And all who heard should see them there." The audience retraces the sequence of the author's creative process: his vision gives him a voice, and their hearing produces a visionary sight. *Could* the author speak his vision, the private would become public, establishing a previously isolated vision as a common referent. At the same time, the speaker would be perceived as mad and banished to a circle for the purposes of exorcism.

This hypothetical communication would be incomprehensible, and provoke excommunication, because the audience could only respond with fear: "all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating

hair!” (“KK” 48-49). The speaker is inscribed in the prosopopoeia that presents others' imaginary discourse, and hearers try to remedy the inspired state he now has them represent and invoke. The previous occurrence of things visionary makes relevant a warning to “weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes with holy dread.” Suddenly the auditor-speakers are like Kubla: they seek to enclose the threatening poet, as Kubla's decrees try to secure his pleasure grounds. A reversal takes place: whereas the speaker earlier identifies with Kubla and the poetic effort to stabilize a dome of pleasure, now he and his vision specifically endanger customary boundaries. Once the speaker renounces efforts to build on ground, instead seeking to “build that dome in air,” he is associated with the destabilizing forces that undo Kubla's pleasure. Deviation from the conversational mode unleashes dangerous forces. The radicalized mode of monologue, a self-referential innovation that pretends to present the language of a dream, threatens to overturn the entire monological reference.

Similar to the second half of the preface, the final stanza of “Kubla Khan” recognizes that the vision has faded. The preface explicitly narrates the scene of interruption and accepts the poem as a fragment. The poem, however, only implies and does not directly acknowledge the disappearance of vision. Without thematizing this loss, the speaker attempts to recuperate what has gone or rather considers the possible consequences of such a recuperation. The imagined speech of auditors at first affirms the preceding visionary stanzas, yet their response also works against affirmation. Because “I cannot” is implied by the conditional statement that begins, “Could I,” the first two stanzas are undermined. If the poet cannot “build that dome in air,” then the speaker himself judges his rendering of Xanadu unsuccessful. At the moment the voice reads and speaks its own failure to represent, the fictional pretense is undone and the poem ends. Though the poem ultimately strives for assurance, its final prosopopoeia narrates as complete a deterioration as the preface, only figuratively. While the preface unifies the poem by linking it to a single scene of writing, the final stanza of the poem shifts scenes as it projects voices and intensifies the speaker's retrospective confession of dissolution. The preface recalls a visionary writing that is abruptly disrupted; the poem (p)refigures this external interruption as an internalized self-undoing.

Coleridge's conversational poems and “Kubla Khan” exemplify one stage in the shifting traditions of literary monologue. Expressing a particular moment in time and treating “Kubla Khan” as a psychological curiosity, Coleridge presents a text that purports to transcribe mental processes. Romantic and postromantic monologues combine lyrical voice and dramatic scene to create a moment of feigned discourse, on the boundary between writing and representation.

Coleridge's conversation poems turn against their origins in Shakespearean soliloquy. Because the fictive speaker does not form part of a dramatic scenario, this persona is haunted by an absence that inheres in its pretense. “Kubla Khan” brings an end to the naïve conversational mode, which it interrupts through the final acknowledgment: the dream is over. Whereas the conversation poems affirm the solitary voice, “Kubla Khan” shows its inadequacy, as it succumbs to a combination of external and internal pressures. The monologist, compelled to follow the peculiar constraints of written conversation, tends to lose touch with mimetic conventions. Pointing the way beyond Hamlet and toward poetic monologues by Shelley and Browning, “Kubla Khan” uncovers the affinity between monologue and madness. As developed by nineteenth-century authors, the conventions of poetic monologue both create and disrupt the illusion of a speaking subject. Monologue as a rhetorical swerve joins with monologue as a fiction of solitude. Mad monologues gradually displace the eolian monologue of meditation and move toward a new literary type that finds further expression in first-person narratives.

## **Criticism: Stefan Ball (essay date 2001)**

SOURCE: Ball, Stefan. “Coleridge's Ancestral Voices.” *Contemporary Review* 278, no. 1624 (May 2001): 298-300.

[In the following essay, Ball comments on the ensuing debate over the meaning of “Kubla Khan,” particularly as it reflects on the past, present, and future of literary scholarship and textual interpretation.]

We all know now that Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem “Kubla Khan” is a masterpiece. But how do we know this? And has it always been known?

“Kubla Khan” was first published in 1816 in a booklet that also contained “Christabel” and “The Pains of Sleep.” Looking back at the first reviews, it is clear that the poem's importance was at first in some doubt. The *Monthly Review* of January 1817 is typical—its review felt the poem was ‘below criticism’—and the opinion of the *Critical Review* of May 1816, in its entirety, was that it was ‘one of those pieces that can only speak for itself.’ As for the *British Lady's Magazine* of October 1816, it rounded off five and a half columns on “Christabel” with the words. “‘Kubla Khan, or a Vision in a Dream,’ Mr. Coleridge describes as the real production of sleep: it is wild and fanciful.’

Most of the reviews adopted the same strategy as the *British Lady's Magazine*, and concentrated on “Christabel” to the near-exclusion of “Kubla Khan” and “The Pains of Sleep.” There were of course reasons for this. “Christabel” was the first and far and away the longest of the three poems, so it seemed natural to treat it as the central part of the book. And it had been read and talked of in admiring terms by the literati for quite a few years before it was actually published, whereas “Kubla Khan” was little known even among Coleridge's friends.

But perhaps the main reason for the neglect of “Kubla Khan” was Coleridge's notorious preface, in which he claimed that the poem was composed during a profound sleep. ‘Perhaps a dozen more such lines,’ suggested the *Edinburgh Review* in September 1816, ‘would reduce the most irritable of critics to a state of inaction.’ The *Academic* was equally scathing in September 1821: ‘... all his works appear to have been composed in a sort of daydream; and in this he has the advantage over his readers, who must exert themselves to keep awake.’

Perhaps surprisingly, no-one seemed especially intrigued at the idea of involuntary composition. In June 1816 the *Eclectic Review* found nothing strange in the idea that people who wrote a lot of poetry should dream in it as well, while a month later the *Literary Panorama* agreed and the *Augustan Review* recalled tales of Milton waking from sleep and writing down ‘twenty or thirty verses, inspired during the night.’ But while the role of unconscious processes in artistic creation was taken for granted, art was considered admissible only if it was tempered and controlled by conscious thought and technique: ‘There seems to be no great harm in dreaming while one sleeps,’ the *Augustan Review* concluded, ‘but an author really should not thus dream while he is awake, and writing too.’

Coleridge was writing at the tail end of the Age of Reason. The conscious mind was the key to progress and enlightenment; unbridled self-expression had yet to become fashionable; tradition and continuity were valued more than novelty; and artifice in art was still a sign of quality. With few exceptions the reading public adhered to critical standards based on experience and reason, and there was little room in either for unadorned dreaming. Indeed, it wasn't until the Surrealists and their popularisation of Freud and Jung that the idea of dreams as somehow intrinsically artistic became even remotely respectable. Before then, the automatic writing of an André Breton or the admission by a Samuel Beckett that he didn't know what his works meant would have been met with blank looks and derision.

Coleridge was of his time. He made no attempt to claim that “Kubla Khan” should be valued more highly or read more carefully because of its supposed dream origin, but presented it instead ‘rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits.’ With no reason to doubt Coleridge's word, the *Augustan Review* was understandably impatient: ‘it was poetry, and not psychology, which the public were likely to expect from him.’



After Freud, we modern readers can if we wish recuperate “Kubla Khan” as a poem by claiming that it shows the poetic unconscious at work. But this isn't the only strategy open to us. In these times of textuality and author-functions and the so-called death of the author many readers feel free to ignore the preface and the author's psychology with equal aplomb. And the empiricists can do the same thing, on other grounds, thanks to the discovery in 1934 of a draft of the poem which showed traces of revision, traces which hardly supported the poet's claim that composition had happened ‘without any sensation or consciousness of effort.’ Since this discovery the main drift of the reasonable and experienced inheritors of the Age of Reason has been to praise the poem for the amount of controlled and conscious artistic effort it displays.

In recent years a further way has opened up for the determined critic: that of questioning the truth of the famous story of opium, sleep and the person from Porlock, while accepting its presence in the name of a kind of poetic truth. Readers can treat the preface as an integral part of the poem, a kind of restatement of the main argument, which is that the vision has passed and left the poet with nothing but a fragment that would amaze the onlooker if it could only be completed. This is part of a broader movement that seeks to make the ‘romantic fragment a literary genre in its own right.’ By pulling in the preface and making a perceived lack of conclusion part of the message, this approach has the advantage of forging greater unity in the work. As readers generally demand unity in literary texts, this strategy appears peculiarly satisfying.

In his book *Doing What Comes Naturally*, the American academic Stanley Fish suggests that the changing reception of a work of art can be explained by the extent to which readers see other beliefs, events or techniques as being relevant to what they read and the way they read it. We can see this process at work in the different weight given to unconscious composition before and after readers started to take Freud's theories into account. We see the other side of the coin, the discounting of evidence once taken as conclusive, in the decision of many to call Coleridge a liar in order to stress the amount of work he put into his writing. And we see the same appeal to presupposed ‘truths in the activities of those who, having assumed unity in all literature, come to the less than startling conclusion that bits of literature must be meant to be in bits, and so must be complete.

The present state of affairs in the appreciation of “Kubla Khan” is, I would suggest, a fairly good guide to the state of literary appreciation as a whole. We have Freudian Kubla Khans, Jungian Kubla Khans, structural Kubla Khans, deconstructed Kubla Khans, generic Kubla Khans, prophetic Kubla Khans, political Kubla Khans and sexual Kubla Khans, feminist, gendered and secular Kubla Khans, and on and on, depending on which particular theory (or theorist) has persuaded the reader into its (or his or her) way of thinking. In the last few decades especially, the acceptance by smaller and smaller groups of readers of endlessly proliferating, widely differing criteria for interpreting and valuing literature has turned relative unity of purpose into a babel of argument, and has opened up the unsettling possibility that the process may continue indefinitely.

Of course, no-one has so far suggested that two words in the title and 54 lines prove that “Kubla Khan” is really a crossword clue with a two word answer of 5 and 4 letters. But when some critics look for anagrams and others diligently try to read what isn't said, there is nothing intrinsically absurd about such a project. From a point in 1816 where “Kubla Khan” was meaningless, it could at some time in the future come to mean anything, or everything. Today's lovers of words no longer enjoy the firm certainties of “Kubla Khan's” first reviewers. Instead we are faced with so many different ways to make sense of a text that, knowing too much, we end up knowing hardly anything, including what we are reading and why we are reading it. Whether this will lead to the death of literature as an object of serious study, provoke some draconian or Leavisite backlash, or spur us on to dizzier heights, only time and the press will tell.

## **Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Poetry Criticism): Further Reading**

## CRITICISM

Adair, Patricia A. "'Kubla Khan' and the Underworld." In *The Waking Dream: A Study of Coleridge's Poetry*, pp. 108-43. London: Edward Arnold, 1967.

*Explicates the imagery of "Kubla Khan" with particular emphasis on references to the underworld of Greek mythology.*

Beer, J. B. "The River and the Caverns." In *Coleridge the Visionary*, pp. 199-229. London: Chatto & Windus, 1959.

*Provides an analysis of the symbolic imagery of "Kubla Khan," in which the river and cavern images in the poem are viewed as representative of "dialectic creativity ... in a fallen world" and Kubla is seen as a emblem of the "commanding genius."*

Beer, John. "Remapping the Roads to Xanadu and Highgate: Another Look at Coleridge's Reading." *The Wordsworth Circle* 29, no. 1 (winter 1998): 25-30.

*Comments on several different types of reading—ranging from "submissive" to "imperious"—and on the limitations of John Livingston Lowes's method of interpreting Coleridge's reading in his 1927 study of "Kubla Khan" entitled The Road to Xanadu.*

Drew, John. "'Kubla Khan' and Orientalism." In *Coleridge's Visionary Languages: Essays in Honor of J. B. Beer*, edited by Tim Fulton and Morton D. Paley, pp. 41-47. Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1993.

*Considers the importance of neo-Platonic and Asian thought to "Kubla Khan."*

Fleissner, Robert F. "'Kubla Khan' As an Integrationist Poem." *Negro American Literature Forum* 8, no. 3 (autumn 1974): 254-56.

*Explores the theme of a reconciliation of opposites in "Kubla Khan," especially in terms of the poem's imagistic depiction of race.*

Hedley, Douglas. "Coleridge's Intellectual Intuition, the Vision of God, and the Walled Garden of 'Kubla Khan.'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no.1 (1998): 115-34.

*Points to the element of mystical transcendence in "Kubla Khan" and probes the poem's reference to the Christian image of paradise as a walled garden.*

Kennard, L. R. "Kubla Can: Wordplay in Coleridge's Poetry." *The Wordsworth Circle* 26, no. 1 (winter 1995): 8-12.

*Examines the role of puns and punning in "Kubla Khan," ascribing these to Coleridge's self-referentiality and modernity as a poet.*

Meier, Hans Heinrich. "Ancient Lights on Kubla's Lines." *English Studies* 46, no. 1 (February 1965): 15-29.

*Reapplies John Livingston Lowes's theory of reading to "Kubla Khan," uncovering references to the poetry of Milton and Spenser, and to the mythical figure of Adonis.*

Ober, Warren U. "Southey, Coleridge, and 'Kubla Khan.'" *JEPG* 58, no. 3 (July 1959): 414-22.

*Presents biographical evidence concerning Coleridge's association with the poet Robert Southey to suggest that "Kubla Khan" was written in late 1799.*

Pearce, Donald. "'Kubla Khan' in Context." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 21, no. 4 (autumn 1981): 565-83.

*Reads "Kubla Khan" in relation to Coleridge's other romantic evocations of landscape in his earlier poetry and in his Notebooks.*

Piper, H. W. "The Two Paradises in 'Kubla Khan.'" *The Review of English Studies* 27, no. 106 (May 1976): 148-58.

*Notes references to the original and restored Christian paradises in "Kubla Khan."*

Wheeler, Kathleen. "'Kubla Khan' and Eighteenth Century Aesthetic Theories." *The Wordsworth Circle* 22, no. 1 (winter 1991): 15-24.

*Evaluates the imagery and thematic texture of "Kubla Khan" in the context of eighteenth-century theories regarding the aims of poetry, the qualities of artistic genius, and the tension between truth and beauty.*

———. "'Kubla Khan' and the Art of Thingifying." In *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*, edited by Duncan Wu, pp. 123-50. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

*Highlights ambiguities inherent in "Kubla Khan" and its accompanying preface as these refer to the fundamental nature of poetic creation and the conveyance of truth through aesthetic experience.*

Youngquist, Paul. "Rehabilitating Coleridge: Poetry, Philosophy, Excess." *ELH* 66, no. 4 (1999): 885-909.

*Assesses "Kubla Khan" within a larger study of Coleridge's opium dependency and his career shift from poet to philosopher.*

Additional coverage of Coleridge's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: *Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults*, Vol. 4; *British Writers*, Vol. 4; *Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography, 1789-1832*; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vols. 93, 107; *DISCovering Authors*; *DISCovering Authors: British Edition*; *DISCovering Authors: Canadian Edition*; *DISCovering Authors Modules: Most-studied Authors and Poets*; *DISCovering Authors 3.0*; *Exploring Poetry*; *Literature Resource Center*; *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, Vols. 9, 54, 99; *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 11; *Poetry for Students*, Vols. 4, 5; *Poets: American and British*; *Reference Guide to English Literature*; *World Literature and Its Times*, Vol. 3; *World Literature Criticism*; and *World Poets*.

## Analysis: Forms and Devices

The most striking of the many poetic devices in "Kubla Khan" are its sounds and images. One of the most musical of poems, it is full of assonance and alliteration, as can be seen in the opening five lines:

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.

This repetition of *a*, *e*, and *u* sounds continues throughout the poem with the *a* sounds dominating, creating a vivid yet mournful song appropriate for one intended to inspire its listeners to cry "Beware! Beware!" in their

awe of the poet. The halting assonance in the line “As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing” creates the effect of breathing.

The alliteration is especially prevalent in the opening lines, as each line closes with it: “Kubla Khan,” “pleasure-dome decree,” “river, ran,” “measureless to man,” and “sunless sea.” The effect is almost to hypnotize the reader or listener into being receptive to the marvelous visions about to appear. Other notable uses of alliteration include the juxtaposition of “waning” and “woman wailing” to create a wailing sound. “Five miles meandering with a mazy motion” sounds like the movement it describes. The repetition of the initial *h* and *d* sounds in the closing lines creates an image of the narrator as haunted and doomed:

His flashing eyes, his floating hair! Weave a circle round him thrice, And close your eyes with holy dread, For he on honey-dew hath fed, And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The assonance and alliteration soften the impact of the terminal rhyme and establish a sensation of movement to reinforce the image of the flowing river with the shadow of the pleasure dome floating upon it.

The imagery of “Kubla Khan” is evocative without being so specific that it negates the magical, dreamlike effect for which Coleridge is striving. The “gardens bright with sinuous rills,” “incense-bearing tree,” “forests ancient as the hills,” and “sunny spots of greenery” are deliberately vague, as if recalled from a dream. Such images stimulate a vision of Xanadu bound only by the reader’s imagination.

## Analysis: Kubla Khan

Coleridge has described how as a young man in poor health he took a prescribed drug. While reading a popular travel book, he fell into a deep slumber and “dreamed” the poem in which a Mongol emperor orders a “stately pleasure dome” near a sacred river that has cut a deep chasm into the earth on its way to the sea.

Two thirds of the poem’s 54 lines describe this strange setting. Then follows a vision of “an Abyssinian maid” whose song would serve the speaker--if only he could revive it--to reconstruct the exotic scene.

One theme of the poem is the nature of poetic inspiration. Coleridge makes use of the ancient tradition that poets are literally not themselves when composing but are possessed by a daemon or guiding spirit. The poet cannot control the daemon, only try to take advantage of it when it comes. This poem paradoxically voices the frustration of a poet whose daemon has departed.

“KUBLA KHAN” has attracted much criticism, including a classic study by John Livingston Lowes, *THE ROAD TO XANADU*. Some critics have accepted Coleridge’s explanation of an unconscious or semiconscious origin, while others have pointed to the poet’s extraordinary command of meter and other sound patterns and even have discerned a logical structure that only a conscious and disciplined artist could achieve. To such critics, Coleridge is providing a carefully crafted picture of a wild creator with “flashing eyes” and “floating hair.”

Whether the poem displays or only simulates wild inspiration, whether the poet is out of his mind or fully in control, “KUBLA KHAN” is a magical poem with a verbal richness approached only a few times by Coleridge and not often by any poet.

## Quotes: "Ancestral Voices Propheying War!"

Context: According to the famous (and very suspect) story recounted by Coleridge, a long poem of some two to three hundred lines came to him during an opium-induced sleep. But after awakening and writing down the

opening, he was interrupted, and could remember the rest only vaguely. The uncompleted poem was published finally at the request of Lord Byron. It opens in narrative fashion: "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/ A stately pleasure dome decree." A highly suggestive description follows with a melange of romantic images: a sacred river, a "lifeless" ocean, savage chasms, a demon lover, fountains, and caves. The poem shifts abruptly into a vision of poetic ecstasy, and then ends. The prophecy of war appears but once in the fragment, and its meaning is only to be guessed at:

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!

## Quotes: "Caverns Measureless To Man"

Context: By his poetry, Wordsworth put magic into ordinary situations. His friend Coleridge tried to make exotic and supernatural situations sound real. They collaborated in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798–1800), a work that ushered in the English Romantic Movement. Coleridge needed to be pressured into writing. The sight of Wordsworth's activity did serve as a spur, and most of his poetry was produced while he lived near Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy in the lovely Lake Region of England. Coleridge's greatest work was "The Ancient Mariner" included in *Lyrical Ballads*. The story of another of his poems has often been told. One day in 1797, he had taken a dose of the opium to which he had become accustomed for his pain. Then while indulging in his other opiate, reading, he fell asleep. He had been reading Purchas, His Pilgrimage (1613), into which an English clergyman named Samuel Purchas (1577–1626) had gathered stories of peoples and religions of the world. He had finished a chapter dealing with the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan (1215?–1294), grandson of Jenghiz Khan, and the palace he had built at Cambaluc, now Peiping, which Marco Polo saw and described. Sleeping profoundly, Coleridge dreamed out a long poem, as John Masefield reported he had seen in a dream and set down later one of his masterpieces. However, Coleridge did not have the same good fortune. He opened his eyes and began feverishly to write down all he could remember. While working, he was interrupted by a caller from the town of Porlock, probably a creditor. By the time Coleridge could send him away, the rest of the poem had slipped from his mind. Only the fragment that he had put onto paper remained. Critics ever since have raged against the interruptor. Yet in its present state, the fifty-four lines of "Kubla Khan" make one of the most magical poems in the English language, full of exquisite music and haunting phrases. Byron used one of the lines: "And woman wailing for her Demon Lover," as the motto for his *Heaven and Earth* (1823). Perhaps it is even two poems, because after the pause at line 35, the poet is reminded of a vision he once had of an Abyssinian maid playing her dulcimer. He cries that if he could only re-create within himself her music, he could rebuild that ancient pleasure-dome and cave of ice to be so real that people would be frightened and believe him some spirit come from Paradise. Scholars have found the inspiring paragraph that supplied some of Coleridge's phrases. It occurs in the 1626 edition, Book IV, chapter xiii, p. 418: "In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately palace encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile meadowes, pleasant Springs, delightful Streams, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure." This is the way Coleridge transmuted the prose into poetic beauty:

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 here 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.