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Article

Eclipsed by the Pleasure Dome: Poetic Failure in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'

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- ¹ 'Kubla Khan' is now one of Coleridge's best known and most widely read poems, yet it still presents twentieth-century scholars and readers with many of the same critical problems that confounded its contemporary reviewers. It's textual history remains unclear, Coleridge's prefatory explanation of the poem's production is often considered dubious, and scholars just can't agree on what it 'means' or if it means anything at all. Most readers interpret 'Kubla Khan' as an allegory for the creative process, relying heavily upon a perpetuated Romantic formulation of the redemptive imagination as described separately by M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Hartman. ^[1] Such critics as Humphry House, Harold Bloom, and Kathleen Wheeler ignore the melancholia of the preface and the last stanza, and decide that the poem celebrates the creative imagination. ^[2] Other readers like R. H. Fogle and Peter Huhn argue that Coleridge achieves thematic and structural unity by reconciling the celebratory and melancholic opposites evident in the poem. ^[3] Finally, readers such as Kenneth Burke, Paul Magnuson, and Anne Mellor suggest that Coleridge sustains a contradictory duality in which he bemoans the poet's creative limitations while simultaneously hailing the power of the imagination and celebrating the process of life, thus expressing what Mellor calls Romantic irony. ^[4]
- ² While seemingly different in their final readings of the poem, these various critical stances locate the redemptive power of the creative imagination within the poet. Further, these readings do not explore in any great detail the rhetorical relationship between the preface and the poem proper and the ways in which this relationship informs Coleridge's complex representation of the creative imagination and the poet figure. If we analyze the subtitle and preface as metalinguistic keys to the poem's interpretive and performative context, we will discover that the poem is not about imaginative redemption or Romantic irony. Rather, 'Kubla Khan' offers its readers a series of false poetic figures, ultimately demonstrating that the ideal (pro)creative and redemptive imagination lies beyond the grasp of the mortal poet, remaining an external and unobtainable other.
- ³ The subtitle and preface to 'Kubla Khan' are indeed curious aesthetic and thematic elements that elicit numerous interpretive responses, editorial practices, and critical perspectives. ^[5] One of the most common readings views the subtitle and the preface as rhetorical apologies added by Coleridge in an attempt to assuage his guilt and/or to avoid harsh criticism. ^[6] Such a reading ascribes a biographical legitimacy to the introductory note, assuming that the speaker is indeed Coleridge. As a result, the preface is elevated to the literal and (mis)construed as an expository addition to the imaginative poem, a supplement that should be distinguished from the aesthetic experience of the poem itself. But what if we denature this (artificial) separation between the prose preface and the imaginative poem and thus include it in the reading experience or, more accurately, in the performance context of the poem? Indeed, critics such as David Perkins, Fred Milne, Marjorie Levinson, and Paul Magnuson have considered this question, analyzing the rhetorical dimensions of the preface and noting the ways in which it informs the reader's interpretive horizon. ^[7]

- 4 I am much indebted to these critical perspectives, for they indeed begin to answer my question concerning the relationship between the prose preface and the imaginative poem. However, they limit their discussions to textual considerations. On the one hand, the preface and the poem are obviously (printed) texts, and it makes sense to address the interpretive relationship between these texts in terms of rhetorical theory. On the other, however, the reading experience—that dialectic between the text and the reader which produces the aesthetic work—is also characterized by a performance context. In other words, the dialectic constituting the reading experience is itself a (cognitive) performance space, and as such presupposes a performance context. Understanding the poem more fully, then, involves a textual analysis that is coupled with a study of the poem's performance contexts. I argue that the preface serves as a rhetorical monocle that allows us to glimpse the poem's performance context and thus better to understand Coleridge's ambiguous poetic metaphysics. [8]
- 5 'Kubla Khan' exhibits metacommunicative devices that remind its audience they are reading a fabricated narrative (the preface) and verse (the poem proper) tale and that reveal a specific understanding of this tale. The very existence or, more properly, the coming into being of the preface suggests that it is itself a rhetorical device that foregrounds the poem's performance context. Critics and literary historians have extensively debated the date of the poem's composition, suggesting dates that range from as early as 1797 to as late as 1800. [9] The most convincing date of composition is Autumn (October or November) of 1797, for this is the date given in the Crew Manuscript endnote in which Coleridge writes, '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.' Furthermore, in a letter to John Thelwall dated 14 October 1797 Coleridge mentions a brief absence that probably corresponds to his stay at Porlock where the poem was composed, and Coleridge goes on to say, '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!'. [10] Here, Coleridge seems preoccupied with the sublime and very specific natural imagery that appear in 'Kubla Khan', helping to confirm further that the poem or some version of it was most likely composed in the fall of 1797. We cannot know if the poem initially had textual supplements; but the 1810 autographed Crew Manuscript contains a short explanatory endnote, and the published 1816 manuscript begins with an elaborate preface. Why did Coleridge feel it necessary to supplement his later manuscripts with such addenda? One explanation concerns Coleridge's role as orator and his ability to affect audiences deeply through verbal performance.
- 6 Coleridge was indeed a powerful speaker, drawing crowds for his sermons and lectures. William Hazlitt remembered being awe-struck by Coleridge's preaching in January of 1798:

As he gave out this text, his voice 'rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes', and when he came to the two last words, which he pronounced loud, deep, and distinct, it seemed to me, who was then young, as if the sounds had echoed from the bottom of the human heart, and as if that prayer might have floated in solemn silence through the universe. [11]

Coleridge also captivated his audiences with his poetic recitations, and 'Kubla Khan' left a significant impression on many of its listeners. For example, Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd noted a particular occasion sometime between 1815 and 1817:

But more peculiar in its beauty than this [Coleridge's recitation of 'Christabel'], was his recitation of Kubla Khan [sic]. As he repeated the passage—

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!

his voice seemed to mount, and melt into air, as the images grew more visionary, and the suggested associations more remote.

And Leigh Hunt recalled the time Coleridge recited this poem to Byron, an event instigating the poem's eventual publication: 'He recited his *Kubla Khan* one morning to Lord Byron, in his lordship's house in Piccadilly, when I happened to be in another room. I remember the other's coming away from him, highly struck with his poem, and saying how wonderfully he talked. This was the impression of everybody who heard him' (Armour, 269).

- 7 These accounts suggest that Coleridge had a commanding presence and elicited intense reactions in his audiences. He was a master orator who performed his poetry effectively, and a portion of this poetic performance involved some kind of performative contextualization. For example, in 1811 John Payne Collier remembered engaging in a literary discussion of dreams with Coleridge and Charles Lamb, a discussion '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: he had founded it on a passage he had met with in an old book of travels' (Armour 177). Even though Collier did not specifically mention a preface or endnote, he did note that Coleridge contextualized the poem for this audience by locating (as far as Collier remembers) its impetus in 'an old book of travels', a performative strategy anticipating the 1816 preface. The endnote of the Crew Manuscript, the information concerning the possible source of the poem that Coleridge shared with Collier, and the later more developed preface to the 1816 published text suggest that Coleridge felt it necessary to contextualize this poem. However, Coleridge is not apologizing for this poem; rather, his contextualization provides an intellectual and epistemological performance context through which Coleridge attempts to assert his poetic authority (yet, as we will later see, he ironically fails in this effort) and with which Coleridge's audience (auditors of his recitations or readers of his printed text) can better understand the poem.
- 8 The first sentence of the preface is significantly set off from the rest as its own paragraph, implying that it holds a singular importance for our understanding of the preface and for the way we position ourselves in relation to the poem. On the surface, this first statement is simply an authorial disclaimer, whereby the speaker discounts his own poem as a 'fragment', a 'psychological curiosity' that caught the interest of some other poet (Lord Byron). [12] One could read this disclaimer quite literally, as do many critics, and thus conclude that indeed Coleridge is dismissing his own work as a mere triviality or curiosity in an attempt to avoid charges of blasphemy (Mellor, 157-58) or poetic and artistic ineptitude (McFarland, 225) contrasting his attempt to argue for creative individuality in the preface to 'Christabel'. [13] However, if we read the preface to 'Kubla Khan' as a key to performance, then an other reading presents itself, resulting in a more rich and complex understanding of the poem and Coleridge's poetic project.
- 9 Kathleen Wheeler provides one possible alternative reading, suggesting that the opening sentence of the preface is an advertisement for the poem that encourages the reader to approach the poem specifically as a 'psychological curiosity' and as a fragment. [14] However, this reading focuses on the interaction between printed text and reader without sufficiently exploring the poem's performative dimensions. Many storytelling performances are initiated by the teller disclaiming his or her tale, attributing the source to some other storyteller or discrediting his or her storytelling ability. Such a strategy conditions listeners to the storytelling act and implies that what they are about to hear will indeed be an interesting and well-told story. The disclaimer is a sign of a good storyteller. Therefore, by subtitled his poem 'A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment' and classifying it as a 'psychological curiosity', Coleridge actually encourages his audience to consider the poem as more than a meaningless dream. Also, by deferring his own poetic authority to that of the celebrated Byron, Coleridge provides more authority to his poem than if he were to assert himself—as if boasting—that he has produced a poetic masterpiece.
- 10 Interestingly, this performative disclaimer differs from the traditional storytelling disclaimer in that Coleridge creates a speaker who presents himself as an editor of the printed text (or the orator of a poem he did not necessarily write) who is clearly separate from the Author figure. That is, this speaker is not reciting his own poem but that of some other poetic agent, and this rhetorical move identifies a poetic context in which the performance itself pertains specifically to poets and poetry. Furthermore, by imposing an artificial tension between psychological curiosity and aesthetic poetry, Coleridge effects the opposite: he conflates psychology with aesthetics, ultimately demonstrating that the workings of the (poetic) mind is indeed proper material to constitute a poetics. In effect, readers are not to dismiss the poem as a 'psychological curiosity' but to look for ways in which Coleridge creates a poetics concerning the faculty of poetic imagination. Coleridge's disclaiming the poem as a mere vision or reverie makes the psychology of poetic creation the subject of his poem.

- 11 The rest of the preface narrative outlines and foreshadows the ways in which the poet's mind becomes the subject of the poem, thus rhetorically schematizing the reader's horizon of interpretive expectation. By developing a narrative of failed poetic activity, the second section of the preface establishes the poem proper as an allegory of imaginative failure. In the preface narrative, readers encounter a clearly mortal and ill poet figure who possesses limited creative abilities. This figure is not the image of a divine creative entity; on the contrary, he is a frustrated poet who is contrasted later to the supremely powerful Kubla Khan and the demonic poet/seer in the last section of the poem proper. This contrast is foreshadowed and, simultaneously, concretized at the moment in his dream when the poet figure encounters his own subconscious double. He sees the imaginative other who he himself is not (and can never be). [15] The Khan figure of the poet's dream whom the poet tries to render (and, thus, poetically and imaginatively resurrect) in his poem is the mirror image of the poet's creative desire (a mirroring that is thematically reinforced by the reflection image in the quotation from 'The Picture') a desire that can never be satisfied but, instead, can only remain as an eternal process of becoming. As the poet tries to obtain his desire in the form of the poem, as he tries to contain this personal *objet petite a*, it becomes a Lacanian gift of *merde*—a fragmented, lost vision. And it is this very narration of desire—coming to terms with poetic failure and coping with the longing to become a supremely powerful decreer of divine grandeur and splendor—that becomes the thematic context of the poem proper.
- 12 In other words, the preface provides a context through which to interpret the poem proper as an imaginative representation of failed poetic figures. It can be argued that the headnote (a fragment itself) abstracted from 'The Picture' posits a hopefulness that the vision may return. However, because this moment of re-vision, as the preface notes, 'is yet to come' (p. 297) this hopefulness is indeed ironic, thus suggesting that 'Kubla Khan' is not about poetic rediscovery but, instead, poetic failure. Xanadu—the fantastic realm where the Khan decrees his stately pleasure dome, where the sacred river Alph meanders down to depthless caverns, and where a constructive/destructive fountain breaks through the rocky surface—represents the creative cognition and the phenomenal mind. In this creative realm there are three key agents: the Khan, the sacred river Alph, and the fountain. In terms of the Coleridgean ideal imagination, these three agents correspond to the three faculties constituting Coleridge's phenomenological model—the fancy, the primary imagination, and the secondary imagination respectively. Coleridge had not yet outlined his phenomenological model when he first composed 'Kubla Khan' in 1797, and readers like Paul Magnuson (viii) find it too reductive to suggest that the poems exemplify Coleridge's later metaphysics. Wheeler answers this charge by deciding that in the very least, this phenomenal model is implicit in the poem (*Creative Mind*, 33). But we can safely say that Coleridge's metaphysics is more than just implicit in his poetry; for while his poetry may not have been written to exemplify his prose metaphysics, his studies in philosophy and metaphysics indeed informs his poetic musing. We know that Coleridge was versed in German and familiar with German philosophy as early as 1796-97 (before and during the creative process generating 'Kubla Khan') because in May of 1796 Coleridge wrote Thomas Poole that he was already studying German and planning to study German metaphysics (*CL*, I: 209). By December 1796 he had already begun to read Kant, referring to the German metaphysician as 'the most unintelligible Emanuel Kant' in a letter to John Thelwall dated December 17, 1796 (*CL*, I: 283-84). Furthermore, by 1796 Coleridge had become disillusioned by 'Mechanic Philosophy' and converted to 'Constructive Philosophy' which conceives the mind as a more active (as opposed to passive) player in the creation of knowledge and the structuring of perception. Even though Coleridge's specific position on the creative imagination is not formally published until 1817 in *Biographia Literaria*, he had been struggling with these various formulations of the imagination, and his continual work with theories of the mind, passive versus active imagination, and conceptions of the will (dating back as early as 1796) informs the thematics and aesthetics of his early poetry.
- 13 In relation to the poem proper, these philosophic theories and models of the creative imagination take the form of multiple poetic figures or creative agents. The first creative figure or agent in this phenomenal realm of Xanadu that we encounter is the Khan, a figure identified immediately with the creative process: 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/ A stately pleasure dome decree' (ll. 1-2). The Khan appears to be the ultimate poet/creator, for his utterances shape his material reality. His active will shapes not merely a poetic text but an aesthetic masterpiece of staggering proportions. The Khan produces an enchanting paradise:

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.

II. 6-11

This pleasure dome is clearly an Edenic realm infused with (masculine) virility ('walls and towers') and seething with sensuality (blossoming incense-bearing trees and soft hills enfolding spots of greenery) and sexual potency ('fertile ground' through which run 'sinuous rills'). It is therefore understandable that so many readers associate the Khan with the creative imagination. [16] However, if we examine this Khan figure more closely, we will see that he is not an agent of the pure imagination but, instead, of what Coleridge called the fancy. While the Khan, as the object of the Author's desire, appears to be the reflection of what the poet cannot be, he ultimately embodies the same poetic failure represented by the Author figure in the preface. That is, in terms of creative ability these figures are opposites, but in terms of Coleridge's model of the imagination they are the same—failed poets of the fancy who do not achieve the Coleridgean ideal. In Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes the fancy as a non-creative faculty that is more empirical than the imagination. It is a lower cognitive faculty related to and influenced by the will, but not dependent upon the will for its operation: 'Fancy . . . has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will . . .'. [17] It may appear as though the fertile gardens of the Khan's creation conforms to Coleridge's organic aestheticism; however, the Khan's kingdom—with its symmetric dome and rigid towers and confining walls—is more akin to a material, ordered realm of 'fixities and definites' that is controlled and mastered by the Khan. [18] It is not an imaginative, ideal realm in which the individual can unite with the infinite. The Khan, rather than being associated with the powers of the pure imagination, is portrayed as a poet of the fancy.

- 14 As a poet of the fancy, the Khan is thus a failed poet who is unable to achieve the Coleridgean ideal. Khan's kingdom, with its caves of ice and sunny domes, is an oxymoronic realm inhabited only by the Khan himself. There is no mention of any other human being (the woman waiting for her demon lover is not a literal inhabitant of the pleasure dome, but a metaphor reinforcing the heterosexist perspective of the [pro-]creative process). Instead of establishing self-unity through community, the Khan's creative act effectively isolates him from outside human contact, like the Ancient Mariner who becomes lost on the cold, wide sea and like Christabel who is separated from her dead mother and becomes estranged not only from her lover Geraldine but also her father. This communal estrangement is paralleled in the final section of the preface, where the Author, just on the brink of poetic genius, is interrupted by a member of his surrounding community and ironically loses the imaginative image. This loss is ironic because imaginative creation, in German and Romantic Idealism, represents an attempt to restore a fractured, disunified self. Because the community is an icon for social unity, it is ironic that an agent from the poet's community—an agent who attempts to conduct business and, thus, to include the poet in the (commercial) workings of that community—effects disunity of the poet's consciousness, resulting in further isolation from the community.
- 15 In addition to isolating him from human contact, the Khan's creative acts do not elevate him to prophetic heights as is expected by the Coleridgean ideal. Instead of actually prophesying the coming of war (a war that signifies further the destruction of the Khan's realm and a denial of imaginative creation) the Khan only hears it amid the tumult of the surging and plunging river Alph. Much like the Author figure of the preface (and the crazed poet in the last stanza) the Khan receives the prophecy, via inspiration, instead of originating it as would the true prophetic poet of the pure imagination. It is also important to note that the Khan never becomes united with these eternal ancestral voices: he remains finitely separate from the infinite. The Khan's eternal separation from the infinite is reinforced by his oppositional relationship to nature. His stately pleasure dome is interrupted and shaken—much like the vision that fades from the Author figure's mind in the preface after being interrupted by the business man from Porlock—by the upheaval that the seething fountain and the tumultuous river Alph initiate. As Regina Hewitt notes, 'the Khan's [creative] 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'. [19] The Khan, as a false poet, creates a phantasmagoric realm that ultimately drifts away from him and fades into the prophetic ancestral voices, thus signifying and sealing his eternal isolation and separation from Coleridge's ideal 'infinite I Am'.

- 16 If the first stanza represents the Khan as the failed poet of the fancy, then the second stanza—clearly marked as a contrast to the preceding stanza (of the fancy) by the textual break and the dramatic 'But oh!' (l. 12)—allegorizes the pure imagination. For Coleridge, the pure imagination exists as a procreative duality consisting of the primary and secondary imagination. These two faculties are not individually distinct; rather, they are dialectically distinguishable. In other words, they are separate only insofar as they serve vaguely different functions. Yet at the same time these faculties are interrelated and dependent upon each other for their individual functioning and for the operation of the imagination. Again in Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes the primary imagination as that creative power which links the individual with the eternal creative force of the 'infinite I Am' or the transcendental whole (*Biographia* 1: 304).
- 17 In 'Kubla Khan', this faculty is best represented by the sacred river Alph(a)—the beginning, the signifier of original and eternal creativity, 'the unifying first principle of all mental activity' (Milne, 21)—that produces and releases the prophetic ancestral voices. The river Alph is the source of the poet's prophetic powers that are achievable only by the primary imagination which unites the finite poet with the 'infinite I Am'. If the river Alph is the primary imagination, then the fountain, as the 'echo' of the river, represents the secondary imagination. According to Coleridge, the secondary imagination is a reflection of the primary creative force, a preliminary sensory processor that attempts to unify apparent perceptual disunities into understandable perceptions before presenting them to the primary imagination (*Biographia* 1: 304). Arden Reed explains that 'the secondary imagination is obliged to 'dissolve, diffuse, dissipate' original perceptions before 'recreating' them, in a way that 'idealizes and unifies'. [20] The fountain, with its heaving rocks and seething pants clearly represents this preliminary faculty that dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates phenomenal impressions, unifying them with the primary imagination or, in the context of the poem, the river Alph:

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.

II. 17-24

The fountain and the river are dynamically related, for out of the sexually destructive/constructive fountain bursts the prophetic, eternal river Alph, thus allegorizing the way in which the primary and secondary imaginations are dialectically interrelated.

- 18 Finally, Coleridge describes the primary and secondary imaginations as dynamic and vital, contrasting them to the fixed and dead nature of objects as objects. In other words, objects in themselves are fixed, dead, indeterminate material, but the powers of the imagination are life-giving in the sense that they transform the indeterminacy of objects in themselves into discernible meaning. We know objects only as phenomena, and it is the dialectic of the imagination that intuits (in the Kantian sense) or gives meaning to or represents (*darstellen*) the object in our minds and assigns an idea or image to that object. Of the elements in 'Kubla Khan', the river Alph and the fountain clearly represent vital agents, always in sensual motion and disruptive (yet constructive) turmoil. The Khan's pleasure dome is but a fixed structure enclosing the pulsing fountain and the meandering river, two agents that destroy in order to construct and to unify. This unifying process is of a sublime order that provides access to the 'infinite I Am' as signified by the ancestral voices. It is clear that the Khan is a failed poet of the fancy who attempts to contain the primary and secondary imaginative faculties, as his walls attempt to enclose the river, only to be left eternally isolated from his ancestral spirits and human community and from the imagination that makes such connections possible.
- 19 This middle stanza representing the integrated workings of the primary and secondary imaginations is interrupted by a final stanza that completes the frame of the preface: the Author figure is abruptly reintroduced, effectively jolting the reader back into the consciousness of the failed poet. [21] The primary and secondary imaginations, in

the context of this poem, are purely fanciful (that is, products of the Author's fancy) and remain eternally illusive. As the Author breaks from his vision and bemoans its loss, he fixates not on the river Alph or the fountain but on the aesthetically tangible caves of ice and pleasure dome: 'It was a miracle of rare device,/ A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!' (ll. 35-36). Instead of recalling the sublime river Alph or the fountain (images that would be more attractive to the poet of the imagination) the speaker attempts to revive the image of the Khan, to become a poetic agent akin not to the imaginative river Alph but to the fanciful Khan. He wishes to be inspired by the Abyssinian maid and to build his own dome and caves of ice, oxymoronic structures that would separate him from imaginative redemption; for to build this dome and caves of ice would necessitate a poetic possession, a succumbing to an external inspirational force.

- ²⁰ This prostrate position relative to an external force is rhetorically paralleled by the Author in the preface who is overtaken by an opium trip and thus receives (instead of creating) the image of the Khan. A poetic process based upon inspiration, as Ken Frieden explains, is an unconscious process and, as such, a passive cognitive mechanism. [22] As early as 1796 Coleridge had rejected 'Mechanic Philosophy' that casts the mind in a passive role, and by the time he publishes *Biographia Literaria*, the mind to Coleridge is a dynamic and willful agent, divided into the more active primary and secondary imaginations and the more passive fancy. The Author figure clearly rejects the faculties of the active primary and secondary imaginations in favor of an unconscious, passive process that is antithetical to Coleridge's ideal poetic process. Furthermore, this inspiration invokes fear in his community:

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 honeydew had fed,
 And drunk the milk of Paradise.

II. 48-54

The poet given in to inspiration becomes an ostracized individual, akin to the Khan figure who is isolated in his pleasure dome and caves of ice and possessing a hypnotic gaze not unlike that of the Ancient Mariner or Geraldine in 'Christabel'. This crazed poet is a demonic figure who becomes inscribed and (textually) enclosed within a mystical circle marking him as an oddity. This poet/seer whom the Author holds as an exemplary creative figure is actually a contained failed poet like the Khan who is girdled with walls and towers. In the end, this Author is doubly failed: first, he does not situate himself with the proper imaginative faculty represented in the poem, choosing instead to identify with the Khan figure and thus missing the real vision in his dream—the nature of the pure imagination; and second, his desire to be a (false) poet secures his eternal isolation from human community. At first glance the Khan and poet/seer figures that the Author longs to emulate appear to represent the poetic ideal—an ideal the speaker fears he may never be able to achieve. Actually, they reflect the Author's own poetic failure. That is, as he attempts to internalize the various poet figures into a unified vision of himself as poet, he ultimately denies himself true identification with the (Coleridgean) poetic ideal, for what he desires is nothing but a projection of his own imaginative inadequacies.

- ²¹ 'Kubla Khan' is indeed a 'psychological curiosity' in the sense that it establishes and foregrounds an aesthetics of the imagination. More specifically, the poem aesthetically represents Coleridge's formulation of the imaginative process that he began formulating as early as 1796 and that becomes most clearly articulated in his *Biographia Literaria*. However, in this poetic representation, the imagination is elevated to a naturalistic realm forever out of reach of the human poet, thus disillusioning all Romantic hope of imaginative redemption through artistic creativity. This Romantic disillusionment is contextualized by Coleridge's preface, for without the preface to the poem, it would be impossible not to identify Khan and the poet/seer at the end of the poem as ideal agents of the imagination. However, when read from the context of disillusionment, we see that Coleridge actually represents these poetic figures as failed poets. Instead of simply apologizing for his poem via the preface and the subtitle, Coleridge was trying to establish a performance context (as he did when he recited this poem in person) in an attempt to foreground his aesthetic and philosophic insecurities and skepticism. As Hewitt concludes, 'the

tensions 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' (54). And H. R. Rookmaaker suggests that, in the context of Coleridge's writings, 'Kubla Khan' allegorizes the metaphysical and aesthetic struggles through which Coleridge was attempting to work. [23] While I agree for the most part with these conclusions concerning imaginative failure, I am suggesting that the poem foregrounds not a tension so much as a melancholic recognition and subsequent re-vision or relocation of vision.

- 22 That is, poetic vision is located not within the individual poet but, rather, in an external other. The poem depicts not what poetic creativity is but, instead, what it is not and cannot be. In this sense, the poem is negatively purposive, for it does not effect a celebration of the poet's divine ability to create sublime aesthetic moments that link the poet to the universal whole (the 'Infinite I Am') thus achieving imaginative redemption. On the contrary, 'Kubla Khan' underscores a disillusionment resulting from the recognition of the poet's imaginative lack, namely the inability to achieve redemption and unity of self through divine acts of poetic creation. This lack or failure on the part of the various poet figures directs the audience to the moment in the vision that the Author misses, namely that the river Alph and the fountain signify the ideal imaginative faculty or, at least, the nature of the creative process and the rewards it brings in terms of a reunification with the community of the past and the future. 'Kubla Khan', then, is a poem about poetic failure, where agents of the pure imagination are represented not by human personae who are to be emulated but, rather, elements of a sublime natural realm that remain external to the individual and, thus, an always already unobtainable other. Any attempt to colonize this other, to girdle it with walls and towers—to fulfill the desire to become an ideal poet of the imagination—is effectively to destroy this other, to nullify the desire. Becoming the poet of the imagination for Coleridge is a desire always in process that cannot be obtained. For to obtain (and, thus, contain) this other is to render it as the self and, thus, to disable or destroy it. The imagination as aesthetically represented in 'Kubla Khan' is a natural other that cannot be obtained, contained, or harnessed by the poet.
- 23 Furthermore, 'Kubla Khan' underscores more specifically Coleridge's personal poetic disillusionment resulting from the recognition of his own imaginative lack, namely his inability to achieve redemption and unity of self through divine acts of poetic creation. As David Riede points out, Coleridge lost faith in his own poetic faculties, viewing himself as 'diseased in will almost to the point of madness'. [24] Ironically, even though Coleridge bemoans his imaginative lack in this and other of his poems ('The Eolian Harp', 'Dejection: An Ode', and, to some extent, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*) his performance abilities suggest that he was a poet of great imagination and authorial command. Yet the literary reviews of 'Kubla Khan' demonstrate that he failed in the eyes of most of his contemporaries, many of whom ignored this poem, cast it in the critical shadow of 'Christabel', or simply dismissed it as a confused and disappointing effort, a fragment generated from his opium-induced sleep that should never have been printed. [25] In the end, the poem not only depicts and explores poetic failure, but its nineteenth-century reception mirrors and reinforces this failure in Coleridge's self-imaging. The goal of becoming the sublime imaginative poet for Coleridge was a desire he could not fulfill; for even as many of the reviews of his earlier poetic works praised his genius and poetic promise, [26] his later poems often confounded and frustrated most reviewers who felt his Germanic aesthetics to be childish, ineffective, and/or overdone. [27] Thus he focused his attentions on proclaiming the imaginative authority of such poets as Milton, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth and establishing his own intellectual authority as literary critic, metaphysician, and theologian.

Notes

- [1] See M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971) and Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'Romanticism and 'Anti-Self-Consciousness'', in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970) pp. 46-56.
- [2] See Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971);

Irene Chayes, 'Kubla Khan' and the Creative Process', *SIR*, 6 (1966) 1-21; Humphry House, *Coleridge: The Clark Lectures 1951-52* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953); M. W. Rowe, 'Kubla Khan' and the Structure of the Psyche', *English* 40.167 (1991) 145-54; Marshall Suther, *Visions of Xanadu* (New York: Columbia UP, 1965); and Wheeler 'Kubla Khan' and Eighteenth Century Aesthetic Theories', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 22.1 (1991) 15-24 (reference will be made hereafter to "Aesthetic Theories" and placed in the text).

- [3] The most recent example comes from Peter Huhn who discusses the ways in which Romantic angst—the fear and anxiety resulting from a contemplation of poetic creativity overshadowed by imaginative sterility—pervades much of Romantic literature, identifying 'Kubla Khan' as an exemplary text allegorizing Romantic self-consciousness. Huhn argues for a reading of the poem that illustrates ways in which the text provides a resolution of the tension between creative genius and imaginative failure. See his 'Outwitting Self-Consciousness: Self-Reference and Paradox in Three Romantic Poems', *English Studies*, 72.3 (1991) 230-45. For an earlier discussion of the ways in which the creation of the poem itself resolves the ambivalence between imaginative fulfillment and poetic disillusionment, see Gerald E. Enscoe, 'Ambivalence in 'Kubla Khan': The Cavern and the Dome', *Bucknell Review*, 12 (1964) 29-36. For further analyses of the poem's 'unity', see R. H. Fogle, 'The Romantic Unity of *Kubla Khan*', *College English*, 22 (1960) 112-16; House; Dorothy Mercer, 'The Symbolism of 'Kubla Khan'', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 12 (1953) 44-66; D. F. Rauber, 'The Fragment as Romantic Form', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 30 (1964) 212-21; and George Watson, *Coleridge the Poet* (London: Routledge, 1966); reference will be made hereafter as 'Watson' and placed in the text.
- [4] Kenneth Burke views this ironic duality as a thematic product of a Hegelian dialectic. See his *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1966). Paul Magnuson suggests that Coleridge creates a poem celebrating poetic creativity while simultaneously testing the validity of the creative imagination, concluding that the speaker's vision of the Khan is a nightmare; for in order to recapture the glory of the Khan and to become the ideal imaginative creator, the poet must succumb to inspiration, must be possessed by the Abyssinian maid and thus feared by the community as a crazed madman. See his *Coleridge's Nightmare Poetry* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1974) pp. 48-49. Reference will be made hereafter to 'Magnuson' and placed in the text. Anne Mellor describes 'Kubla Khan' in terms of Romantic irony, arguing that the poem offers an image of the unifying pure imagination (in the semblance of the Khan figure) which is then undermined by the disruptive forces of self-doubt, mortality, and rationality (seen most clearly in the melancholy and poetic longing of the final stanza). Mellor concludes that Coleridge leaves these antithetical forces unreconciled, thus resulting in an ironic duality characteristic of Romantic irony. See her *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980) pp. 155-59. Reference will be made hereafter to 'Mellor' and placed in the text. See also John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959) (reference will be made hereafter as 'Beer' and placed in the text) and David Simpson *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (London: Macmillan P, 1979).
- [5] David Perkins provides a helpful summary of the various editorial practices demonstrated in popular anthologies, practices ranging from printing the entire introduction and headnote to leaving out the headnote and/or printing only a portion of the introduction. Perkins also speculates on the different possible interpretations of the poem when read with and without the introductory note. And he provides a brief discussion of current critical positions regarding the introductory note. See his 'The Imaginative Vision of *Kubla Khan* : On Coleridge's Introductory Note', in *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination: Romanticism and Adam's Dream*, ed. by J. Robert Barth and John L. Mahoney (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1990) pp. 97-108. Reference will be made hereafter to 'Perkins' and placed in the text.
- [6] According to Mellor, Coleridge feared being charged with blasphemy for celebrating the (pro)creative imagination. Therefore, he labeled the poem a fragment and added 'Or, a Vision in a Dream' to the title so as to suggest that the poem need not be taken seriously, and he wrote the preface in order to distance the poem from criticism, implying that it should be dismissed as pure folly (157-58). Thomas McFarland also suggests that the preface is an apology for a poem of which Coleridge was ashamed. McFarland portrays Coleridge as a disturbed, guilt-ridden, and neurotic man who was haunted by feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and animosity toward his mother and brothers. McFarland suggests that Coleridge, an emotionally unstable poet, undermined and disclaimed his poem by writing the preface so as to avoid the psychological pain of negative criticism. See his *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) pp. 104-36, 225. Reference will be made hereafter as 'McFarland' and placed in the text. For other discussions of the preface serving as apology or poetic self-deprecation, see Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Bernard Breyer, 'Towards an Interpretation of 'Kubla Khan'', in *English Studies in Honor of James Southall Wilson*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, *University of Virginia Studies*, 4 (1951) pp. 277-90; and Elizabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1953).
- [7] Perkins argues that the preface provides readers with a narrative plot against which to interpret the poem, concluding that it is a rhetorical addition used by Coleridge to invoke an appropriate reading of the poem (98-101). Fred Milne also suggests that the headnote signals the subject of the poem, thus providing a specific

context for reading it as an allegory for the creative process. See his 'Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': A Metaphor for the Creative Process', *South Atlantic Review*, 51.4 (1986) pp. 17-29 (p. 19); reference will be made hereafter to 'Milne' and placed in the text. Similarly, Marjorie Levinson contends that the head note provides a unifying link between the introduction and the poem itself, thus foregrounding both the creative process and the tension between immediate direct observation and the distancing results of discourse (i.e., the externalization of the observed object from the self). See her *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1986) p. 98. And, finally, Magnuson decides that the preface—regardless of its fictionality or verisimilitude—serves as a frame for interpreting the poem as an exploration of the creative process (40). See also Breyer; Chayes; and Richard M. Rothman, 'A Re-examination of "Kubla Khan"', *English Journal*, 55 (1966) pp. 169-71.

- [8] It is indeed true that for readers of the poem, the performative context is identical to the interpretive context, because the act of interpretation is performative in nature. The distinction between these two contexts is most clear when we consider Coleridge's various recitations of 'Kubla Khan' (see below) performative acts carried out within a carefully constructed discursive context through which Coleridge attempted to influence, if not determine, the listeners' reactions to and interpretations of the poem. However, it is important to think about both of these contexts, because as I argue below Coleridge established a similar performance context in the written versions of the poem (a context that is recreated in different ways depending upon the editorial decisions of later publishers) using the preface and the subtitle as ways to create a discursive context that helps the reader perform the poem (if only in his/her mind) and thus interpret it in a specific way.
- [9] For example, see E. K. Chambers, 'The Date of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*', *Review of English Studies*, 11 (1935) pp. 78-90; Malcom Elwin, *The First Romantics* (London: Macdonald, 1947) pp. 226-32; Lawrence Hanson, *The Life of S. T. Coleridge: The Early Years* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938; repr. 1962); and Schneider, 153-273.
- [10] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1956-71) I, p. 349. Reference will be made hereafter to 'CL', followed by volume and page, and placed in the text.
- [11] Richard W. Armour and Raymond R. Howes, *Coleridge the Talker: A Series of Contemporary Descriptions and Comments* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1940) p. 243. Reference will be made hereafter to 'Armour' and placed in the text.
- [12] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by E. H. Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1912) I, pp. 295-98 (p. 295). All reference to 'Kubla Khan' will be placed hereafter in the text.
- [13] Clearly in the preface to 'Christabel', Coleridge attempts to explain and defend against charges of plagiarism. But the curious issue here is that as Coleridge strives to establish in his life a poetic community—a striving for community reflected in much of his poetry, not the least in 'Christabel'—he is denied by critics the opportunity to join in and be influenced by a community of poets and must therefore argue for his creative individuality.
- [14] *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1981) p. 20. Reference will be made hereafter to 'Creative Mind' and placed in the text.
- [15] For a different discussion of the Khan figure as poetic double and psychological projection of Coleridge's desired poetic self, see Eli Marcovitz, 'Bemoaning the Lost Dream: Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and Addiction', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 45 (1964) 411-25.
- [16] As Wheeler points out, the garden is a familiar trope for creative genius throughout eighteenth-century literature, and the Khan, the decreer of the garden paradise in 'Kubla Khan', for Wheeler, becomes a metaphor for the creative imagination ('Aesthetic Theories', 22-23). Magnuson casts the Khan figure as the ideal prophetic poet to whom the speaker aspires at the end of the poem (42, 47). While Mellor briefly discusses the ways in which the architectural unity of the Khan's paradise—a unity that contains and domesticates the fertile ground of Xanadu—represents the Khan as a neoclassical creator who is antithetical to the Romantic poetic project (155) she ultimately decides that the Khan is a prophetic figure whose creations are products of pure imagination (157). And Milne reads the Khan as the embodiment of the divine, as an agent of the pure imagination (22).
- [17] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (2 vols.; London and Princeton: Routledge & Kegan Paul and Princeton University Press, 1983) 1: 305. Reference will be made hereafter to *Biographia* and placed in the text.
- [18] For other discussions that interpret the Khan as a maniacal and self-indulgent creator of artifice that contains and colonizes the natural realm, see Beer, 222-29 and Watson, 117-30.
- [19] 'False Poets in 'Kubla Khan'', *English Language Notes*, 26.2 (1988) 48-55 (p. 49). Reference will be placed hereafter in the text.

- [20] *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1983) p. 189. For a more descriptive, analytical discussion of Coleridge's definition of the imagination, see M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953) pp. 167-77 and Jonathan Wordsworth, "The Infinite I AM: Coleridge and the Ascent of Being", in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*, ed. by Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) pp. 22-52.
- [21] For a significantly different discussion of the poem's structure; the relationships among the preface, the poem proper, and the final stanza (read as an epilogue); and the complicated associations between the Author of the preface and the 'I' of the epilogue, see Wheeler, *Creative Mind*, 20-30.
- [22] 'Conversational Pretense in 'Kubla Khan'', in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1986) pp. 209-16 (pp. 211-13).
- [23] 'Kubla Khan' in the Context of Coleridge's Writings around 1802', *English Studies*, 68.3 (1987) 228-35.
- [24] David G. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) p. 192.
- [25] See *British Lady's Magazine* 4 (Oct. 1816): 248-51; *British Review* 8 (Aug. 1816): 64-81; *Critical Review* 3 (May 1816): 504-10; and *Edinburgh Review* 27 (Sept. 1816): 58-67.
- [26] See *Analytic Review* 23 (June 1796): 610-12; *British Critic* 7 (May 1796): 549-50; *Critical Review*, 2nd Series 17 (June 1796): 209-12; and *Monthly Review*, 2nd Series 20 (June 1796): 194-99.
- [27] See *Academic* (Sept. 15, 1821): 339-41; *Anti-Jacobin Review* 50 (July 1816): 632-36; *British Review* 8 (Aug. 1816): 64-81; and *Champion* (May 26, 1816): 166-67.

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