

"Kubla Khan" as Human Artifact

by

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In his preface (1765) to his edition of the plays of William Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson states that "to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientifick, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem" (Johnson 59-60). Further on he asserts, "[N]othing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature" (61). He refers to works of creative literature, such as Shakespeare's plays. Like those plays, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" cannot appropriately be termed a work "raised upon principles demonstrative and scientifick." As a work of creative literature, the poem, first published in 1816, as "A Fragment," continues to be accorded esteem enough to be widely anthologized and subjected to ongoing critical discussion. My reasons for granting it critical attention supplement what are evidently the main causes for the continuing interest in the poem. I argue that, in its own way, as a rhetorical artifact among the other works of creative literature, the poem appeals "to observation and experience" and constitutes one of the "just representations of general nature." For this reason it merits the continued attention given to it. The poem is in one way an oddity in that along with its text is often included in some manner, if only by reference in a footnote, the poet's proffered account of how the poem came to be written. The claim that Coleridge composed the poem while he was asleep and dreaming, and that, upon awakening, he wrote down as much of it as circumstances allowed him to retain, has been challenged and, for me anyway, largely discredited

(Schneider 21-109; Fruman 334-50). Nevertheless this claim seems to be an important reason for the continued anthologizing of the poem. At the issue here are at least two major concerns.

The first of these is a notion still given currency in some circles that the poet is somehow a vehicle chosen by the divinity for proclaiming words of importance to the human masses, in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus of Nazareth, for example. At the least, the works of some creative writers are accorded a reverential awe, and the writers themselves viewed as persons possessed of genius divinely bestowed. I see something of this notion in the following remarks of G. Wilson Knight included in his often-cited discussion of "Kubla Khan" in his book *The Starlit-Dome* (1941):

In *The Christian Renaissance* [1933] I wrote at length on the concept of immortality as it emerges from interpretation of poetry. I concluded that, though we must normally think in temporal terms and imagine immortality as a state after death, yet poetry, in moments of high optimistic vision, reveals something more closely entwined than that with the natural order. It expresses rather a new and more concrete perception of life here and now, unveiling a new dimension of existence. Thus immortality becomes not a prolongation of the time-sequence, but rather that whole sequence from birth to death lifted up vertically to generate a super-temporal area, or solidity.... The poem ["Kubla Khan"], anyway, needs no defence. It has a barbaric and oriental magnificence that asserts itself with a happy power and authenticity too often

absent from visionary poems set within the Christian tradition. (93, 97)

This is talk of a kind with which I am no longer comfortable. For example, the above use of the words "solidity" and "happy power" have no meaning for me. Such language takes me too far away from my own everyday experiences and attempts to impose upon me a view of poetry that I do not find persuasive. My reading in recent criticism convinces me that I have much company.

A second, complex, notion involved in the continuing attention given Coleridge's poem I also have some trouble with. I see it as but a variation of the above, one occasioned by the rise of modern science and its interests—namely the make-up and processes of the physical world. By this notion, "nature," viewed in a "romantic" context, exists as a conduit between the divinity and at least some humans, providing a channel from the divinity to the poet's conscious mind by way of the human unconscious. The contention is that some meanings of profound importance have place deep within our being. Among poets, goes the claim, are persons empowered, at least fitfully, to experience these meanings, which they then encode in their works. The following words of Patricia M. Adair, from her *The Waking Dream: A Study of Coleridge's Poetry* (1967), convey something of this notion:

Surely *Kubla Khan* means that the poet, when divinely inspired, remembers the inscrutable secrets of the world below, singing of a mystery and terror which seems to men like the gift of prophecy. The poem, which begins with the river plunging into the underworld and ends with the divine madness of the poet, is, also, I believe, about the mysterious

unconscious sources of creative inspiration and the poet's brief singing of this memory on his return to the sunlit conscious world. (116-17)

I personally have problems with much of this text. Clear referents just do not come to me. Phrases such as "divinely inspired," "the inscrutable secrets of the world below," and "singing of a mystery and terror" to me seem words of fantasy. I hesitate to call the language pure cant, but I am tempted.

In my remarks here I eschew reference to contexts such as I have mentioned above to examine "Kubla Khan" in the light of what Johnson's words suggest to me. The question I endeavor to answer is "What in the context of common experience and everyday life does the poem have to suggest to us?" I purposely stay on or near the surface of "observation and experience" and on or near the surface of what the process of articulation can convey in the way of meaning. My approach can be said to be basically empirical and eclectic. I must use this approach to claim any meaning for Johnson's notion of "just representations of general nature."

As have some others, I see "Kubla Khan" as having two rhetorical parts, the first composed of the first two stanzas of the poem and the second of the third stanza, in which the personal pronoun "I" is used (Coleridge 157-158). The first stanza I see, as have others, as, evidently, describing a "stately pleasure-dome" and its immediate locale, which is "girdled round" with "walls and towers." The second stanza, beginning with the word "But," I see as describing the outlying locale beyond the walls. What is beyond the walls contrasts with what is within them. The conclusion of this stanza, beginning with line 31, contains a brief comment on this contrast. The third stanza, and

second major rhetorical unit of the poem, moves us from geological locale and comment on it into a mental locale—the memory and meditations of the "I" speaker. In a general way, then, seen as I characterize it, the poem conforms to the structure of the loco-descriptive meditative, or prospect poem common in the works of English poets from at least the late seventeenth century on into the days of the Romantic poets and beyond (Abrams 527-28). This realization takes away from the poem some, though by no means all, of its *sui generis* quality.

Moreover, I am one of those who argues that the poem is not a fragment but, for what it is, a complete poem. One cohesive element that I see present in it is a focus on the theme of power—a topic that has provoked much discussion in recent decades, in regard to the likes of children, the elderly, various racial and ethnic groups, women, homosexuals, and the economically and politically underprivileged among the above or of whatever other kind. In a generic mode, this theme is present in the first stanza of "Kubla Khan" in the use of the verb "did . . . decree." It echoes at the end of the poem in the use of the verbs "Could . . . revive" and "would build." Also, an attempt at meeting power with power is there implied in the imagined command, "Weave a circle round him thrice." The weaving of the circle has reference to a use of beneficial magic to control an evil or merely frightening power, and the use of the word "thrice" causes us to think of the power suggested by the concept of the Christian trinity. But the most emphatic references to power appear in the long second stanza, where we find, for example, this analogy: "As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing, / A mighty fountain momentarily was forced." These and other words in this stanza remind us that vast and threatening powers inhere in the physical world around us.

Furthermore, the use of the verb "did . . . decree" at the beginning of the poem evokes, among other possibilities, images of a god, a tyrant, and, indeed, even an artist. All three of these have place in the poem. Kubla Khan, for reasons both internal to the poem (grammatical subject of the above verb) and external to it (relevant historical sources from which the name comes), seems a political force, one capable of ordering built a pleasure dome. The wild natural scene depicted in the second stanza implies a creator, a divinity or awesome natural power, responsible for the very existence of what is described. And the speaker "I" in the third stanza seems at least to imagine artistic or visionary powers capable of building "that dome in air." The poem is widely accepted as a statement about, or an attempted statement about, the process of poetic creation. This contention is evident in the Adair passage above, the meaning of which I have questioned. What I emphasize here, in my attempt to stay within the bounds of what might be common experience, is that the theme of power, of a recognizable kind, permeates the poem and for that reason serves to unify it. An awareness, recognition, and identification of various forms of power is appropriate, even necessary, to "just representations of general nature." All of us exert power of some kind and have power of many kinds exerted upon us.

A second theme unifying the poem is that of pleasure. In the first stanza, Kubla Khan's dome is characterized as a pleasure dome, and its immediate surroundings, within its protective walls, described as pleasant, including "fertile ground," "gardens bright," "sinuous rills," many a "blossomed . . . incense-bearing tree," "forests ancient as the hills," and "sunny spots of greenery." In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker's implied desire once again to have the ability to build "that dome in air" seems to have as

its goal the pleasure that accompanies creative achievement. In addition, the implied desire to strike others as somehow possessed with an insight, power, or genius that would fill them with "holy dread" seems to have as its goal not only personal fulfillment but also ego gratification, as if the person who would be the creative artist would also, if he or she could, be the likes of a political tyrant, even the divinity, if possible. Related to such psychic desires are the sexual desires and satisfaction implicit in the second stanza, where mention is made of "woman wailing for her demon-lover," the earth breathing "in fast thick pants," and more. Recognition of the existence of the pleasure principle and the various forms that pleasure can take is, I must contend, significant to any "just representations of general nature."

Besides the themes of power and pleasure, the poem contains a third that has been discussed by others, that of order versus disorder. I offer my own analysis of this contrast.

What went on under the pleasure dome we are not told and can only guess. The dome, its protective walls, and what would seem to be a selected, perhaps even cultivated, setting within the walls and towers all provide a suggestion of order, which is at least in part the result of human exertion and endeavor. The possibility of the dome's being built "in air" can represent order of another kind, that offered by a work of art. What is described in the long second stanza, however, is a contrasting disorder—earthly, dynamic, threatening, and seemingly beyond the understanding and control of humankind. This includes the existence of a "deep romantic chasm," "ceaseless turmoil seething," "a mighty fountain momentarily [that is, intermittently] . . . forced," the "swift" bursting of "[h]uge fragments [that] vaulted like rebounding hail," a sacred river "flung up," and more. (There might, in fact, be a form

of order in this seeming chaos, but it is not readily discernible in the depiction.) A generalization about humankind and its condition that this contrast between order and disorder brings to mind is that humankind tends to seek and enjoy order, quiet, protection, but is beset always by external natural forces—such as earthquakes, avalanches, and hail storms—and psychic/biological internal natural forces—such as the desire for personal fulfillment, ego satisfaction, and sexual gratification. Moreover, the mention near the end of the second stanza (line 30) of “[a]ncestral voices prophesying war!” reminds us that humans are cruel to humans, that warfare remains with us, and that protective walls and towers are yet in need. This is a general picture of the human situation that continues accurate. We seek pleasure, order, quiet, leisure, but experience them only intermittently. The ways of life are largely dynamic and threatening. The discussion here thus brings us close to an answer to the question I ask above, “What in the context of common experience and everyday life does the poem have to suggest to us?”

Related to the suggestion that human life is dynamic and threatened is another—the “archetypal” implication of *Alph*, the sacred river, running down to a “sunless sea.” Implicit in this image is the notion that human life is a mysterious and sacred gift that runs a course limited in range and duration. The “sunless sea” and “lifeless ocean” can readily be seen as representing death; and the “caverns measureless to man” can be seen as representing all there is to life and its course that is beyond our understanding. The river’s seemingly disappearing and then reappearing can be seen as representing life’s ups and downs (or downs and ups, in this depiction). The caves of ice might be seen also as representing life’s downs, and ultimately death. This representation is appropriate to the conclusion of the second

stanza, which offers the comment on the contrast depicted in stanzas one and two: “It was a miracle of rare device, / A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!” Human life is paradoxical, a mixture of good and evil, pleasure and pain; and it has an end.

Related to this emphatic suggestion about the course of human life is the image in the second stanza of “chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail.” Here we have the vegetation cycle referred to—grain sowed, grown, and then reaped, one form of life in death providing sustenance for other forms of life in continuance. The earlier references to “fertile ground” within the protecting walls and to, there also, “gardens bright” and blossoming trees, whose blossoms will soon fade (even within the confines of human attempts to control), evoke thoughts of the life cycle of plants, similar to that of human beings, a life cycle that is part of the natural dynamics that are vividly described in stanza two. So powerful are the natural dynamics depicted that at the conclusion of stanza two the “dome of pleasure,” of human making, is depicted as casting but a “shadow” on the “waves” of the passing river water. Human effort and control are limited, so much so that the “I” speaker can do no more than regret that he has no longer the inspiration or power to “build that dome in air, / That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!” Again, the depiction of the general human condition is clear, and so is my reason for terming “*Kubla Khan*” one of the “just representations of general nature.”

The poem is unusual but can be accounted for in way that does not involve fine points of theology or a probing of the human unconscious. It can be seen as an artifact of Coleridge’s own life—particularly in its reflection, in the last stanza (and second rhetorical part), of a serious ego concern (Schneider 108; Fruman 4132-20).¹ It can be seen also as an artifact of his age. I have already mentioned the poem’s

similarity to the loco-descriptive-meditative poems of that age, including, for example, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," and even the so-called conversation poems by Coleridge himself. The poem's exotic, "eastern" flavor is also reflective of some interests of the time. One has to think only of Joseph Addison's "Vision of Mirazh" (1711), Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), and William Beckford's *Vathek* (1787) to get a sense of one taste of the age.² Because the east and middle east are no longer exotic for us in this age of global information and awareness, popular taste has sought for something of the same effect in science fiction and horror stories—something well beyond demon lovers. That matters exotic—including the Abyssinian maid in lieu of the Greek muse—are used in the poem to evoke an image of the human condition helps universalize that image. So does the historical distancing, in the reference to Kubla Khan and in the use of the age-old image of the possessed artist, with "flashing eyes" and "floating hair." The overall image that I see the poem evoking conforms, in its own strange way, to what I think Johnson had in mind. Even in what some now characterize as a multi-perspectivist, non-foundational age, this image of the human condition—including concerns of power, pleasure, dynamics (some of which are threatening), ego, and desire for wish fulfillment—is one that we can only with self-deception and an escapist's ingenuity deny. To the extent shown, "Kubla Khan" is a rhetorical artifact of the poet's life, his historical period, and human life in general.

Notes

¹Of considerable interest here is the evidence that Coleridge might have suffered from manic depression (Jamison 219-24).

²"The Oriental craze—which owed much at the outset to the inspiration of *The Arabian Nights*—affected both England and France" (Wagenknecht 130). This work was translated into French in the early years of the eighteenth century, and the translation quickly made its way across the English Channel.

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