

‘Kubla Khan’: The Waking Dream

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Coleridge developed his ideas on the relationship between poetry and dreams throughout much of his lifetime. He was fascinated by the nature of dreams and was particularly intrigued by the fact that a dreamer passes no judgement and accepts with full faith all that is happening within the dream. He recognized that the state of poetic faith in which a dream places its viewer could be envied by poets, and came to believe that the *aim* of a poet is to create a state of illusion for the reader that is akin to, differing only in degree from, dreaming (LL II 266). In the *Biographia Literaria* he says,

The poet does not require us to be awake and believe; he solicits us only to yield ourselves to a dream; and this too with our eyes open, and our judgment *perdue* behind the curtain, ready to awaken us at the first motion of our will: and meantime, only, not to *dis*believe.
(BL II 217-18)

By emulating the state of illusion in dreaming, a poet may create in the reader a propensity to believe the improbable, to suspend his judgement and to follow the poet into the waking-dream experience of imaginative fiction.

Yet Coleridge also realized that poetry could not exactly emulate a dream, for to the waking mind dreams often seem absurd and irrational. Comparing Klopstock with Milton, Coleridge says,

The inferiority of Klopstock’s Messiah is inexpressible. I admit the prerogative of poetic feeling, and poetic faith; but I cannot suspend the judgment even for a moment. A poem may in one sense be a dream, but it must be a waking dream.
(LL II 425)

Since the will is not fully disabled when reading as it is in sleep, one may pass a judgement of disbelief when the illusion is not strong enough to create or to sustain the reader’s dream-like state. Coleridge believed that poetry produces a state in the reader that is akin to dreaming, but also compatible with the waking judgement. In ‘Kubla Khan,’ Coleridge was creating just such a waking-dream experience for the reader in order to achieve the highest state of poetic illusion, and this is, I would argue, the key to its success as a dream poem.

One of the primary dream-like elements of the poem is its seemingly-symbolic language. Many of the images appear to be interpretable, yet several of these can accommodate more than one possible interpretation. In 1818 Coleridge wrote that the ‘Language of Dreams [...] is a language of Images and Sensations [...] [where] The Images [are] either direct, as when a letter reminds me of itself, or symbolic—as Darkness for Calamity’ (CN III 4409).

He also believed, at least from 1804, that poetry communicates with its readers, not only through written language, but also through a common sympathy of generalizations. In ‘Kubla Khan’ Coleridge was evoking such

sympathy in his readers through what is familiar and personal to all. Just like the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poetry he praises in his notebooks and in the *Biographia Literaria*, he too uses 'general' imagery (CN II 2599)—dome, river, caverns, sea, gardens, forests, fountain, etc.—as a system of communication. Most, if not all, of the images are familiar to all readers and many suggest interpretable symbols that may be commonly understood within and across some cultures, but are not so generic as to suggest only one reading. 'Kubla Khan' both invites and resists symbolic interpretation in the same way as do dreams.

The wide variety of critical readings is testimony to 'Kubla Khan's' dream-like language. Several of the images in the poem suggest certain interpretations, but rarely is there only one possibility. The Khan, for example, may be focused on as a figure of authority—a Napoleon—or instead as the man who 'ordered letters to be invented for his people' (CN I 1281), civilizing yet destroying the primal. The fountain that bursts forth from beneath the earth readily suggests, in the context of the poem, the act of creating when the conscious poet changes ideas in the mind into words on the page, and inspiration when unconscious ideas become conscious, but can also suggest sexual intercourse¹ or laboured birth.² Likewise, the landscape may be sexualized, as in the readings of Gilbert and Gubar,³ or psychologized as in that of M. H. Rowe.⁴ These interpretations are so different that readers are led in very diverse directions. It is no accident that some critics like Norman Fruman⁵ and Eli Marcovitz⁶ give psychoanalytical readings while many other critics focus on a history and politics that the poem appears to subsume. Critical interpretation varies widely in most literature, but the elusive nature of 'Kubla Khan's' dream-like language almost cries out for it. Certain readings are preferable when the other images of the poem are interpreted, but in creating a system of communication based on multi-interpretable, generalized images, Coleridge specifically invites the variation. He has emulated a dream's seemingly-symbolic language of images.

In 'Kubla Khan,' Coleridge initially leads the reader into the poem's simulated dream experience with the hypnotic rhythm of the verse. The first four lines imitate the rhythm of a swinging pendulum or the ticking of a clock as they entrance and lull the reader with the four stresses of their regularly iambic meter:

In Xa na du did KU BLA KHA N
A sta tely plea sure-dome de cree:

¹ Cf. Norman Fruman, *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972).

² Cf. K. M. Wheeler, *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981) 33.

³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'The Mirror and the Vamp: Reflections on Feminist Criticism,' *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (New York: Routledge, 1989). Cf. Alan Richardson, 'Coleridge and the Dream of an Embodied Mind,' *Romanticism* 5.1 (1999).

⁴ M. H. Rowe, ' "Kubla Khan" and the Structure of the Psyche,' *English: The Journal of the English Association* 40.167 (1991).

⁵ Norman Fruman, *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972).

⁶ Eli Marcovitz, 'Bemoaning the Lost Dream: Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and Addiction,' *International Journal of Psychosis* 44 (1964).

Where ALPH, the sac red riv er, ran
 Through cay erns meas ure less to man [...]
 (PW I 1 512-13 1-4; my emphasis and spacing).⁷

Coleridge was fascinated by the states of mind between those of sleeping and waking. During the time that 'Kubla Khan' was written he was intrigued by mesmerism⁸ and the magnetic sleep in which conscious volition was said to be suspended.⁹ Coleridge would have recognized in the magnetic sleep similarities with the waking-dream state he wished to create for his readers. He would have also seen similarities with the state of mind produced by opium, the medical term for which was 'hypnotic' as deriving from the Greek *hypnotikos* meaning 'narcotic, causing sleep.'¹⁰ If 'Kubla Khan' was an attempt to produce or reproduce an opium-related dream in a poem, it is evident that he would have sought to induce a type of hypnotic state with the use of poetics.

Spenser was known to many of the Romantics as 'the poet of our waking dreams.'¹¹ The pure fantasy he created in *The Faerie Queene* was the ideal waking-dream experience—a poem to emulate as one that achieves the highest degree of imaginative fiction in poetry. Coleridge recognized the advantage of the position in which Spenser placed his readers. He has been quoted as saying,

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.¹²

By creating a hypnotic rhythm, especially in the initial lines of 'Kubla Khan,' Coleridge was leading readers into the same 'charmed sleep' or waking-dream experience in which is suspended disbelief.

As the rhythm charms the reader so too does the mythic quality of the poem. Xanadu and the Khan are both historical, yet legendary. They have an exotic quality about them and are so far beyond memorable history as to seem mythical. They create an atmosphere of historical romance, giving the reader a

⁷ All poetry quotations in the present chapter are taken from PW I 1 512-14. They are hereafter only cited by line number.

⁸ See J. B. Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1977) 220; and Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 26 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 101. Although Coleridge did not readily subscribe to the doctrine of mesmerism and was at times sceptical, his interest is undeniable as it pervades his notebooks and other works for at least thirty-five years (1795 to 1830). See also Frederick Burwick, 'Coleridge, Schlegel, and Animal Magnetism,' *English and German Romanticism: Cross-Currents and Controversies*, ed. James Pipkin, Reihe Siegen, Beiträge zur Literatur- und Sprachwissenschaft Band 44, (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1985) 275-300.

⁹ Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 26 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 103.

¹⁰ 'Hypnotic,' *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2001 ed. Cf. 'Hypnotic,' *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed, 1989; rpt 1991.

¹¹ William Hazlitt, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, vol. 2, Pickering Masters (London: Pickering, 1998) 205. 9 vols.

¹² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Constable, 1936) 36.

point of reference before he is led further into the waking dreamland that is created by romance.

The poem tells of a 'stately pleasure-dome decree[d]' (2) by 'Kubla Khan' (1) in the midst of a landscape at once seen and unseen. Allegorically it is the incarnation of a perfect and ideal vision standing majestically in the landscape of the mind and all of its known and unknown workings. The 'sacred river' (3) that flows through all, connecting and bringing sustenance to the landscape represents the source of ideas and inspiration that allow the Khan to create. The landscape above ground, 'fertile' (6) and 'bright' (8), seems to have a visible perimeter in the form of the 'walls and towers' (7) that 'were girdled round' (7), but though the walls encompass the garden on the sides, below the ground the caverns stretch 'measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea' (4-5), to profound depths unknown, unseen, and impossible to contain.

The hypnotic rhythm of the verse continues, but with a more varied meter, to create a heightened dream effect and appear truer to nature—to the supposed transcription of a real dream—than would a more structured meter and form. In an article entitled 'Coleridge, Mary Robinson, and the Prosody of Dreams,' Daniel Robinson writes effectively on the 'dream world'¹³ that Coleridge creates through his versification. Robinson suggests that Coleridge may have followed what he saw as Spenser's lead and 'devised a prosody of dreams to achieve a similar effect'.¹⁴ Indeed the varying verse of 'Kubla Khan' does appear to the reader to be less consciously constructed and more believably a product of the unconscious. The rhythm flows smoothly so as not to disturb the reader from the waking dream in which Coleridge wished to place him. Had the rhythm been too regular or equally too irregular, the result may have been noticeably conscious or jarring and would have dissolved the dream effect. Coleridge often noted the lack of surprise felt in sleeping dreams. Nothing in the rhythm of the poem, he realized, could surprise the reader or the hypnotic effect would be lost.

The historical and exotic but natural romance of the first section slides deeper into the waking dream as it moves into a more supernatural, gothic romance. The 'deep romantic chasm' (12) covered by cedars—ancient trees—is 'A savage place' (14), wild and sublime. The description of the chasm invokes the imagery of romance: not only is it 'enchanted' (14), it is 'holy' (14), not in the traditional sense, but in the way in which Romantic romance depicts a dark, superstitious and eerie side to religion. The place is only as holy as one 'haunted' (15) by the archetypal Eve-like 'woman' [not *a* woman] wailing for her demon-lover' (16) by the dim light of 'a waning moon' (15). The supernatural imagery of the figure who haunts and the demon she loves is balanced by its parallel in the Biblical figures of Eve and Satan. While the 'woman' (16) and 'demon-lover' (16) give the Biblical figures a supernatural and mythical quality, their Eve and Satan counterparts give them a familiar,

¹³ Daniel Robinson, 'Coleridge, Mary Robinson, and the Prosody of Dreams,' *Dreaming: Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams* 7 (1997): 121.

¹⁴ Daniel Robinson, 'Coleridge, Mary Robinson, and the Prosody of Dreams,' *Dreaming: Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams* 7 (1997): 126.

quasi-historical balance. Having evoked the dream of romance with the exotic legend of Kubla Khan and Xanadu, Coleridge leads the reader further into the 'charmed sleep'¹⁵ with the more supernatural imagery of gothic romance.

While there is motion in the first eleven lines with the flowing of the 'sacred river' (3) 'Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea' (4-5), the movement is smooth and fluid. At line twelve the pace increases and the motion turns to turbulence as the chasm slants 'athwart' its 'cedarn cover,' (13) as 'woman' wails (16), and as the pressure of the river and chasm builds to a climax and erupts with volcanic force. The imagery is of generation¹⁶ and is representative of creative energy and inspiration in the birth of ideas, as the sacred river explodes in one climactic moment of creativity:

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).

As the fountain of inspiration bursts forth from below, the sacred river flows from the cavern like lava. Down through the garden, 'Through wood and dale the sacred river ran' (26) in all directions, 'meandering with a mazy motion' (25) then back down through the 'caverns measureless to man' (27) it 'sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean' (28). What the river touched along the way is inevitably fertilized and will provide the materials for creation.

Lines 29 and 30 mark a dramatic turning point in the poem. Kubla, who had decreed the original, ideal vision 'heard from far/ Ancestral voices prophesying war!' (29-30), as the creativity threatens to shatter the ideal. Lamb believed the ideal truly and firmly exists in the mind as something that can be lost. Of watching a stage production of Hamlet he says, 'We have let go a dream, in quest of an unattainable substance.'¹⁷ When the fountain of inspiration brings ideas to the surface and the poet begins to transform the vision into a poem, the 'dream' is inevitably lost.

The vision has been transformed into a 'shadow' (31), which recalls Plato's cave. It is only a shadow of the ideal that had existed in the garden. Yet, while it only floats 'midway on the waves' (32), it is surrounded by the 'mingled measure/ From the fountain and the caves' (33-34), so that those who see the shadow hear music from the sacred river—strains of inspired and profound ideas from the imagination. It is not the same as the original vision, but it is nevertheless 'a miracle of rare device,/ A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of

¹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Constable, 1936) 36.

¹⁶ Cf. Paul Magnuson, *Coleridge's Nightmare Poetry* (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1974) 44.

¹⁷ Charles Lamb, 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation,' *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, vol. 1 (London: Methuen, 1903) 98. 7 vols.

ice' (35-36). The vision has been transformed and although it is only a shadow of the mind's original, the new creation reconciles the oppositions. It is a miracle; a realized dream. While the beginning of Lamb's statement—'We have let go a dream'¹⁸—may apply, the end cannot because the poem *is* an attainable substance, different from the original vision, but, as John Beer says, it 'does exist; and it has value.'¹⁹

There are sixteen, primarily scenic, transitions in the poem as the reader is led from one place to the next.²⁰ The reader imagines first Xanadu where there is a pleasure-dome and a river (1-3), then measureless caverns (4), followed by a sunless sea (5). From there he is led back above-ground to the fertile ground, gardens, and rills girdled by walls and towers (6-9), then to ancient forests (10), and further to a chasm slanting down a green hill (11-12), and on throughout the poem. Coleridge emulates the movement of sleeping dreams as one image flows smoothly into another, yet the transitions are in harmony with the waking judgement and do not disturb the waking dream.

The transition at line 37 creates the effect on the reader of one dream leading into another quite different dream. This is not to say that these are two dreams of the 'Author' or 'I' of the poem; it is rather the effect on the reader to which I am referring, as Coleridge copies for him the experience of the dream. The light, dancing verse coupled with the very different scene of 'A damsel with a dulcimer' (37) cause the reader to feel as if the initial dream has dissolved and a second dream appeared. The transition is substantial and impossible not to notice, yet remarkably the reader is not surprised enough to lose the dream-like effect. The poem retains its charmed hold and keeps the reader, as Coleridge says, 'in the Land of Faery—i.e. in mental space' (LL II 409-10). Yet it is evident that it is a different dream than before. The first part of the poem begins to feel more like a dream within a dream, where line 37 marks the first level of waking; or rather a memory, which is a similarly imaginative state to dreaming. It is a shift that takes the reader out of the charmed hold of the first section, but one that takes him immediately into another.

For the first time in the poem a viewer of the vision is introduced, though it is a different vision of which he speaks:

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 (37-41).

The 'I' longs to experience it again:

Could I revive within me

¹⁸ Charles Lamb, 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation,' *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, vol. 1 (London: Methuen, 1903) 98. 7 vols.

¹⁹ J. B. Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1977) 118.

²⁰ I place the sixteen transitions at lines 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 13, 17, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 31, 37, 42, and 48.

Her symphony and song
To such a deep delight 'twould win me [...] (42-44).

He wishes to 'revive' her music within him, to remember and to recreate that inspired state.

The light, playful rhyme of the lines on the damsel become longer and heavier as the poem recalls the description of Xanadu and the vision of the pleasure-dome, serving to take the reader back to a more deeply charmed level of the waking dream. Where lines 37-42 hover between 3 and 4 feet, refusing to be pinned down, the verse slows significantly with the 5 feet of line 44, and with the long, heavy stresses of the 'o' and 'u' sounds in line 45 with 'That with mūsic lōūd and lōng.' Just as sleep follows the deep sleep/REM/deep sleep cycle, so does the poem reflect differing levels of the depths of dreaming. While Coleridge could not have known of this cyclical phenomenon, he was intensely interested in the different levels of reverie, waking dream, trance or magnetic sleep, nightmare (in which he believed that one is between sleeping and waking)²¹ and sleep, and it is likely that the different levels created for the reader by Coleridge are intentional, to emphasize the profound depths of the purely imaginative pleasure-dome and caverns.

Longing for the lost vision the 'I' (38) is confident that if only he could 'revive within me/ Her symphony and song' (43), he could create in poetry a vision of that creation:

[...] with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice! (45-47)

He believes that 'all who heard' (48) would see the vision itself and the creative process through which it was built. Longing turns to frenzied dream as he envisions himself in the role of, and acclaimed as, poet possessed by inspiration:

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 drank the milk of Paradise. (49-54).

Although he begins by describing a longed-for state, the conditionals are soon forgotten and by the end the poet has fed 'on honey-dew [...]/ And drank the milk of Paradise' (53-54). The 'I' has assumed the role of poet.²² The increase in the pace of these lines recalls the original climax of lines 17-24, but this is a creative process in which the poet has a role. Where the inspired ideas

²¹ See for example LL I 135-36 and CN III 4046.

²² Paul Magnuson, *Coleridge's Nightmare Poetry* (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1974) 49.

originally rushed to the surface, he must now work to build up this second realization. He has lost the vision, but gained a poem created through human will. In a poem concerned with the loss of creative inspiration, the paradox is that through that loss Coleridge has created, for 'Kubla Khan' has been written.

The waking dream of the reader parallels the experience in the poem by revealing the creative process. The music of the damsel—the muse who pours forth the inspired strains—reveals to the poet the workings of the imagination in the creative process. She sings of Mount Abora, not of Kubla Khan, the pleasure dome, gardens or fountain, but because the creative process happens when she sings, he comes to see that process because of her. It is not Mount Abora he has seen in a vision, but the damsel herself. He wishes to revive her symphony and song, not so that he can finish a very short fragment of a poem on Mount Abora, but so that he can again take part in the creative act and through it come to understand more fully the processes of the imagination in creativity. Coleridge has presented 'Kubla Khan' as a dream poem so that the reader can also take part in the creative process. Coleridge would have recognized that reading is always a creative act. However he believed that dreaming is a very purely imaginative experience and by placing the reader in a waking dream state, he is giving the reader the opportunity to see the creative process likewise revealed. Coleridge becomes for the reader, the damsel. His symphony and song—the poem of 'Kubla Khan'—enable the reader to understand the process for himself as it happens to him. As the reader imagines the gardens, fountain, caves, and the damsel, those images are created in his mind and he can experience first-hand personal emotions being evoked by the generalized images. It is through this reader involvement in the waking-dream experience that the poem reveals its representation of the creative process.

Through its hypnotic rhythm, scenic transitions and apparent visionary sight, 'Kubla Khan' has, as Lamb says of Spenser,

[...] the shifting mutations of the most rambling dream, [even while] our judgment [is] yet all the time awake, and neither able nor willing to detect the fallacy,— [it] is a proof of that hidden sanity which still guides the poet in his wildest seeming-aberrations.²³

Coleridge has achieved what he calls the aim of a true poet by creating a state of poetic illusion akin to dreaming. He places his reader in a 'charmed sleep,'²⁴ creating for him a waking-dream experience and it is through this artful balance of dream and waking judgement that 'Kubla Khan' has its success as a dream poem.

²³ Charles Lamb, 'Sanity of True Genius,' *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, vol. 2 (London: Methuen, 1903) 189. 7 vols.

²⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Constable, 1936) 36.

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