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“ ‘Weave a Circle Round Him Thrice’; Three Takes on ‘Kubla Khan’ ”

John Powell Ward

THIS IS a rather loose and rambling meditation based on (rather than fully about) ‘Kubla Khan’; I really have been somewhat away from Coleridge studies for the last three or four years, which may explain the ‘three’ takes of my title. It seemed prudent to take at least three aspects of the poem and hope to make a point or two on each, rather than treat a single topic in length and depth, something I’m currently hardly competent to do even if I ever was.

Take One

‘Kubla Khan’ as *automatic writing* or *divine dictation*.

This is about what happens when a poet is suddenly ‘given’, donated as from nowhere; a complete poem, which the poet need not compose, but simply has to write down. (And the act of physical writing itself is common in discussions of this topic.) We’ll come to the poets; but the obvious primal case is the sacred text. Take the Book of Revelation in the Bible. The author opens by telling us how on one occasion, ‘feeling spiritual on a holy day’, he heard a great voice saying, “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last... What thou seest, write in a book, and send it to the seven churches of Asia”. That actually isn’t ‘divine dictation’ pure and simple, for here the poet must write down, not a given text, but the scene in front of him. But it’s worth mentioning in context of ‘Kubla Khan’, both as to the ‘I AM’ claim central to Coleridge *passim*, and, in the poem, the likely ‘Alpha/Omega’ reference in Coleridge’s ‘sacred river Alph’. Again letters of the alphabet (here Greek or Hebrew); again writing itself. A purer ‘divine dictation’ claim is made for Islam’s sacred book, the Koran. The Koran was sent from Allah down to earth in three stages. Allah first made the famous ‘protected tablet’ and the pen to write on it with; He then imprinted it with the Koran text; and thirdly transmitted this to the Prophet Muhammad on earth via the angel Gabriel. That last stage took twenty-three years.¹ With the Koran’s tablet and pen, Revelation’s command to write, and the terms ‘divine dictation’ and ‘automatic writing’ too, the emphasis on *writing* is paramount.

And so to the poets. ‘Divine dictation’ and ‘automatic writing’ are commonly associated with William Blake and W B Yeats respectively.² Blake

¹ Farid Esack, *The Qur’an: A Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oneworld 2002, pages 31-33.

² T.S.Eliot wrote about this too, in somewhat different aspect. He referred more than once to periods of ‘incubation’ from which whole passages of ready-made poetry would suddenly erupt. He was sceptical of the process, and any divine origin, but acknowledged passages of his own which came from such events. T.S.Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London: Faber 1932, page 405; and *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, London: Faber 1933, esp. pages 143-146.

clearly thought his great poem *Milton* was not his own work. Writing to Thomas Butts in 1803 he said: "I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation, twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without Premeditation & even against my Will... all produc'd without Labour or Study..."; "I may praise [the poem] — i.e. it's OK for me the author to praise it], since I dare not pretend to be other than the Secretary; the Authors are in Eternity".³ As with the Koran, Blake took many years to complete *Milton*, so 'divine dictation' is not always instant, though it often is.

As to Yeats, the 'automatic writing' was actually practised by his wife Georgie Hyde-Lees. According to Yeats's biographer and critic Richard Ellmann, Georgie's pieces usually connected some "cosmological insight" with a "personal reminiscence of [her own]". At first Yeats believed in the "communicator" (or 'opposite self') whose voice and ideas Georgie was recording. Later he "gradually relinquished the supernatural hypothesis" and rejected automatic writing entirely, as being discourteous to the reader — for a poet should take at least some trouble — yet some poems, including late ones, probably still grew out of his wife's work⁴.

So what of Coleridge? In the 'Preface' to 'Kubla Khan' Coleridge reports as follows. He was "for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved."

Parts of this are ambivalent. Coleridge's isn't sure whether the "correspondent expressions" he was given, can really be so called. Equally the poem as a "psychological curiosity" (his description of it later in the Preface) may, perhaps, confirm that indeed only his "external senses" were asleep, leaving the subconscious wide awake and perhaps actively recipient. But again the writing thing certainly happened; both "without any sensation or consciousness of effort" (like Blake's "without Premeditation... Labour or Study"); and also in "taking pen, ink and paper instantly... wrote down" the Kubla Khan lines. In daily life we might say to someone "I'll just write down that address" but we'd hardly say "I'll just take pen, ink and paper and write down that address". No decisions; Coleridge simply *wrote*.

I'm going to look at all this through the famous definition of the primary imagination in the *Biographia Literaria*. "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a

³ S.Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, London: Thames & Hudson 1973, pages 275-276.

⁴ Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, Faber 1954 pages 149, 151, 163, 283.

repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” What interests me here is that word ‘repetition’. *Repetition*; just that; not even ‘echo’ (a kind of resonant repetition) and far from the classical parallel of *mimesis*, Aristotle’s ‘imitation of an action’. And our question is, is this sheer ‘repetition’ also something similar to what happens with ‘automatic writing’ and ‘divine dictation’.

Well: I have scanned about fifteen critical works on Coleridge for discussions of the word ‘repetition’ in that context, and find almost no comment on the matter in any of them. The one exception is James Engell and W Jackson Bate in their Introduction to their edition of the *Biographia*. Their comment is as follows. “As a ‘repetition’ in the finite mind... the primary imagination... basically produces a *copy* of what has been created in nature by other individuals... There is no originality in the primary imagination; it repeats and copies... The secondary imagination produces a true *imitation*, not a mere copy.” The “contrast between copy and imitation [again Aristotle surely] essentially reflect[s] the distinction between the primary and secondary imagination”.⁵ *No originality in the primary imagination* — that’s a strong comment indeed. So: is this ‘copy’ (repetition) a copy of the original creator’s creative act itself, or just of some item which that creative act has already produced? Here’s a homely comparison. Imagine Taunton beat Bridgewater 6—3 in soccer — a rare score in any football scene. They meet again later; Taunton vary their tactics to preserve surprise, and they win 6-3 again. This is perhaps a ‘qualitative’ repetition. But meanwhile, over in France, Marseilles also beat Toulouse 6-3, neither of those French clubs has ever heard of either Bridgewater or Taunton, and the ‘repeat’ in that case is a ‘non—qualitative’ one. A thin analogy no doubt but a point is made.

And which of the two is Coleridge’s meaning? If the former, a ‘qualitative’ repeat, then he is already moving toward his own idea of the *secondary* imagination; equally qualitative, for it ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create’. That would leave the primary imagination and its pure repetition with nothing left to do. But if the latter, the ‘non-qualitative’ repeat, then what is its character and procedure; in what way does it stem from the eternal mind which is supposed to have initiated it? How is this a “living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception”? One answer, surely, might well lie precisely in automatic writing, divine dictation, for the poet is entirely passive in his reception of what is dictated.

And if ‘Kubla Khan’ is itself a religious poem — perhaps an expression of redemption attained — then surely its author too, given the circumstances of its composition, might see it as sent down from on high as printer’s ‘copy’, all ready for transcription. Possibly Coleridge thought so. John Beer thinks Coleridge may have wondered if “there was, after all, a discoverable link

⁵ *Biographia Literaria*, edited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate: Princeton University Press (Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Bollingen Series LXXV), volume I, Editor’s Introduction, page xci.

between the life of God... and the imaginative life of man as [that] operated in the depths of the unconscious...". Likewise the priest-critic David Jasper suggests that Kubla Khan's dome comes into being by "almost a divine fiat... repeat[ing] the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" itself (my emphasis).⁶ We must leave this first topic there, but my view at present is that divine dictation is the obvious, perhaps only, candidate for the functioning mode of the primary imagination as Coleridge defines it.

Take Two

'Kubla Khan' and the Conversation Poems: dreams, language, and Christianity.

The issue here is how far 'Kubla Khan' really is a dream and if so what that tells us about it. We will mention the Conversation Poems here too; this second 'take' is a bit more complex.

Coleridge's sub-title, "A Vision in a Dream", supports the dream claim to an extent. But strictly dreams are irretrievable. We don't remember even our own dreams with precision, and can never see anyone else's. And so for example one researcher on dreams, Patricia Kilroe, has distinguished between the dream itself and the 'dream report': what we tell others about our scary, blissful or bizarre dream of last night. The dream 'report' is a distinct category, usefully researchable in itself, with its own expressive features like "that's all I can remember" or "then, suddenly, the scene shifted". 'Kubla Khan' contains nothing like that. All that side of it is in the Preface. But Kilroe has also pointed out a third item; neither the sleeping dream nor the public dream report, but a middle stage between them. This is the 'dream remembered', the waking traces of my dream, which aren't the dream itself but equally aren't the dream *twice*-removed in 'reported speech'.⁷

Maybe the dream-poem proper, so to call it, is also in this midway position. It isn't the dream itself, which would be impossible; but it isn't a dream-report of it either. Perhaps then a poem, not reporting a dream but, we might say, rendering it, is as close to Kilroe's 'dream remembered' as we can get — certainly 'Kubla Khan' is, if it followed as soon as Coleridge's Preface says it did. Such a view might well explain why many find the meaning of 'Kubla Khan' opaque. Researcher Bert States concludes that dreams are meaningful but not translatable.⁸ Some dream-researchers indeed ask whether dreams bear interpretation at all and aren't wholly random constructions. So maybe phrases like 'he on honey-dew hath fed', 'a damsel with a dulcimer' and 'ancestral voices prophesying war' do mean something but don't tell us what. And since John Livingston Lowes called the poem's "pageant of imagery".....

⁶ John Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence*, Macmillan 1977, page 104. David Jasper, *Coleridge as Poet and Religious Thinker*, Macmillan 1985, page 47

⁷ Patricia Kilroe, "The Dream as Text, The Dream as Narrative", *Dreaming*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2000

⁸ Bert O. States, "Dream Bizarreness and Inner Thought", *Dreaming*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2000

“as aimless as it is magnificent”; and T.S.Eliot thought such imagery “not used; the poem has not been written”; and John Beer refers to its “name-fabrications and a certain inconsequence”⁹, then maybe ‘Kubla Khan’ at least is less a ‘dream-report’ than a ‘dream-remembered’.

The poem’s language comes out of this ‘dream-remembered’ state. ‘Kubla Khan’ has language of great compression and it is declamatory. Freud saw ‘condensation’ (compression) as one of the two key concepts of dream analysis (the other was ‘displacement’), and Paul Magnuson applied the same term to ‘Kubla Khan’ itself. For example:

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. (ll. 6-11)

The single exception to this declamatory mode in the poem, the much-noted passage beginning, “Could I revive within me” is of course a ‘conditional’; ‘*if* I could revive within me... *then* I would build that dome in air...’. But it is very brief — as Anita O’Connell puts it, “the conditionals are soon forgotten”¹⁰ — and the poem’s final climactic lines widen out into full universality. So ‘Kubla Khan’ looks like straight assertion, straight description, straight declamation, all the way.

In the Conversation Poems it is very different. Far from being dream poems, they seem at times firmly to underline that they are not. For three of the five, ‘Frost at Midnight’, ‘The Nightingale’ and the Dejection Ode, take place at night but are still clearly wide awake. As the poet himself declares in the Dejection Ode, “’tis midnight, but *small* thoughts have I of sleep”. The language is different accordingly. I’m going to suggest that, if ‘Kubla Khan’ declaims, the Conversation Poems *tend*; they have tendency. And if declamation is (as I take it to be) unilateral — ‘this is so, this is so, and this is so too’ — then expressive tendency is multilateral. It can go in various directions. This is of course common in most daytime expression, but Coleridge’s exceptionally, sometimes uncontrollably, divergent mind makes such tendency more marked and in a richer texture. I would have liked to explore (but won’t here) all this in terms of Austin/Searle ‘speech act’ theory, where verbs carried, not straight assertion, but varying enactments, such as I promise, I congratulate you, I reckon, I apologize, I wonder whether — ? and so on. This can in fact be diversified a very long way indeed, and we can only note, from the

⁹ John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, London: Constable 1927, page 412; T.S.Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, London: Faber 1933, page 146; John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, London: Chatto & Windus 1970, page 201; Graham Davidson, *Coleridge’s Career*, New York: St Martin’s 1990, page 90.

¹⁰ Anita M.O’Connell, “ ‘Kubla Khan’: The Waking Dream”, *The Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series No 24, Winter 2004, page 35.

Conversation Poems, apostrophes like 'My pensive Sara!', "my gentle-hearted Charles!", wistful recollection such as "But O! How oft,/How oft, at school, with most believing mind — ", poetic hypotheses like "should you close your eyes, you might almost/ Forget it was not day", and, from "The Eolian Harp", a couplet in which moral and appreciative modes are barely distinguishable:

Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so filled.

The close of the 'Dejection Ode' is a beautiful combination of apparently formal command with actually great self-denial (for Coleridge has been working through self-humiliation at several levels):

Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing...
O simple spirit, guided from above,
Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice,
Thou mayest thus ever, evermore rejoice. (ll. 128, 134-139)

Coleridge calls upon sleep to heal Sara Hutchinson when in truth he would have her wide awake and be in bed with her himself. And these few examples of tending and 'tendency' can raise finally here the religion issue in all these poems; and I have a suggestion to make.

'Tendency' may be connected to tenderness. The etymology, though complex, is in place, for giving something or someone *attention* can move toward both *tending* them straight (like a carer or nurse) and *tending in their direction*, which can mean an analytical tendency which can be of varying kind. A line in the Latin poet Horace's poem 'Ars Poetica' (The Art of Poetry) runs, *non satis est pulchra esse poemata; dulcia sunt*. 'Dulcia' as in the *dulce* of the traditional Remembrance Day quotation -- also from Horace -- *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*; 'it is *sweet* and fitting to die for one's country'. But 'sweet' isn't really right for the 'Ars Poetica' quotation; too sugary by half; and I prefer the American poet Kenneth Koch's version in his translation of 'Ars Poetica'; "It is not enough for a poem to be beautiful. It must be *tender* as well."¹¹

'Tender' has various meanings. It is gentle and *caring* as already suggested; it means to *offer*, as in 'tendering' our resignation; but it is also *vulnerable* — a Coleridgean attribute surely — as in 'careful of my bruised leg please, it's still tender.' But these meanings of tenderness are also close to the characteristics of Christian love which its adherents claim for it. 'Caring' self-evidently; 'offering' as of help, one's time and so on; but also the 'vulnerable' which maybe calls up the humility by which our fallible natures come to think less of themselves and more of other people. And all three meanings do float through the Conversation Poems; but none really in 'Kubla Khan'. This isn't to downgrade 'Kubla Khan'. In Horace's contrast, 'Kubla Khan' is by no means

¹¹ Kenneth Koch, 'The Art of Poetry', University of Michigan Press 1996.

'beautiful' and nothing else. But then the religious question arises. If the Conversation Poems are Christian, what is 'Kubla Khan'?

I would put it that that 'Kubla Khan' is an Old Testament poem; Islamic if you prefer, but 'Kubla Khan' is prophetic under the aegis of the Law and indeed begins with a 'decree', albeit one recorded not enacted. And it is also — going back to where we started — a remembered dream, and the Old Testament is full of dreams. Pharoah's butler and baker; the young Samuel; Jacob's ladder, and many, many more. (The New Testament has dreams — Joseph and Mary avoiding Herod for example — but they are less frequent and far less typical.) The tenderness suggested for the Conversation Poems specifically matches the Christian claims in that their 'speech acts' underline their 'tendencies'; caring, self-offering, and perhaps loveable vulnerability — for we do all love Coleridge's sad self-knowing failures, don't we?

Take Three

'Kubla Khan' as the poem interrupted.

Whether "the poem interrupted" is an authentic poetic genre in itself I don't know; but here for comparison is a twentieth-century poem by R S Thomas, 'A Person from Porlock'.

There came a knocking at the front door,
The eternal, nameless caller at the door;
The sound pierced the still hall,
But not the stillness about his brain.
It came again. He arose, pacing the floor
Strewn with books, his mind big with the poem
Soon to be born, his nerves tense to endure
The long torture of delayed birth.

Delayed birth: the embryo maimed in the womb
By the casual caller, the chance cipher that jogs
The poet's elbow, spilling the cupped dream.

The encounter over, he came, seeking his room;
Seeking the contact with his lost self;
Groping his way endlessly back
On the poem's path, calling by name
The foetus stifling in the mind's gloom.¹²

There is a simple and perfectly adequate reading of this poem if we want it. The poet is sitting at his desk writing a poem. It's gathering momentum, he's consulting some books and the poem seems to be growing inside him.

¹² R.S. Thomas, *Song at the Year's Turning* (1955)

Someone knocks at the door. With some irritation he goes and deals with the matter, and returns only to find his poem has died on him. As compensation perhaps, he writes another poem about that very event. Then he remembers some story about Coleridge being interrupted by a 'Person from Porlock' and that makes a good title. That's all there is to it.

But background information on Thomas may suggest a little more. For this poem is one of three that quite early in his career Thomas wrote concerning Coleridge, all at about the same time. One, called simply 'Coleridge', appears only three poems earlier than 'A Person from Porlock' in the 'Later Poems' section of the collection *Song at the Year's Turning* (1955). The third poem, 'Green Categories' is very near the start of Thomas's very next collection *Poetry for Supper* (1958). It imagines a meeting between a Welsh farm worker and the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant's massive influence on Coleridge — the "giant's hand" and all that — fairly allows us to group this poem with the other two. Indeed this was R S Thomas's common practice. A later group of his poems echoes T S Eliot, another Matthew Arnold, a third Wallace Stevens. With degrees in Classics and then theology — i.e. not 'Eng Lit' — he taught himself the poetry canon by reading poets carefully one at a time with systematic concentration. It is highly likely that he attended to Coleridge, too, in this way; and this poem 'A Person from Porlock' may therefore offer more on our present topic than appears at first sight.

For example; the floor "strewn with books" may, deliberately or otherwise, evoke the sizeable reading — beloved of 'Kubla Khan' enthusiasts from Livingston Lowes on — which apparently precipitated Coleridge's poem into existence. Thomas often refers to poets he has read, but seldom to reading itself, so this is a notable exception. Equally the image of the foetus in the womb — "big with the poem soon to be born" — could be a match, intended or not, with the dream which stimulated Coleridge. Womb and dream are both places of darkness; warm, fertile and secreted. But then there is a further suggestion, in the poem's second line, "The eternal, nameless caller at the door". Thomas was an Anglican priest. The eternal and nameless one then might surely be God, whose Son Jesus Christ "stands at the door and knocks" inviting us to let him in (Revelation III 20,¹³ but commonly attributed to Christ, as in the famous painting by Holman Hunt). If this reading is at least possible, then the rest of the poem may follow accordingly. The poet/priest puts aside his religious calling for the sake of human creation; i.e. writing a poem; he is thus usurping God, as Satan aspired to in *Paradise Lost*; and in a deserved nemesis Thomas's poem is stifled in the womb and dies.

But if we look at the gaps; what is *not* said, there is yet another possibility. The main gap comes after the first knocking, which "pierced the still hall,/ But not the stillness about his brain". When the knock is repeated, the poet "arose". Which is exactly what we do when we wake up in the morning; we

¹³ 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with me'.

rise. Of course the poet didn't hear the first knock. Like Coleridge he was asleep. Again something not said; for he didn't say he was at his desk; we just assumed it. And it is the 'floor' that was strewn with books; maybe a bedroom floor; not a study desk at all. Such may seem unlikely but nothing in the poem actually denies it. [Thomas possibly even imagined the whole thing himself; had merely been reading 'Kubla Khan' and got the idea from that. But that seems less likely; his own poem is too vividly present.]

So what do we make of all this? In both poems the writing is *interrupted* by someone knocking at the door. But otherwise they are very different. Actually, Thomas's poem conflates the two aspects of 'Kubla Khan', the Preface and the poem itself. As a form it equates with the text of the poem 'Kubla Khan', but in subject matter it covers the Preface. And that leaves a major item missing. For if we think of Coleridge's poem as having two parts, the Preface and the poem, then Thomas's 'second part' would be the poem that got interrupted, which we know nothing about, and which indeed may even have never been completed. I suggest that this missing poem mattered greatly to Thomas, and that 'A Person from Porlock' can be seen as a poem of interruption in its essence. I think it took Thomas straight back to 'Kubla Khan' as a major example of this putative genre, "the poem interrupted". After all — and Thomas may have noticed this too — all three of Coleridge's Dream Poems are interrupted, in one sense or another. 'The Ancient Mariner' is interrupted from the very first stanza, in aid of a long story which the Wedding Guest "cannot chuse but hear". 'Christabel' is interrupted (so Coleridge tells us in a letter) by a "*deep* unutterable Disgust" arising from his translation 'of that accursed Wallenstein' and which led Coleridge to drop it, with "a deeper dejection than I am willing to remember" (my emphasis).¹⁴ And of course 'Kubla Khan' too.

There is a further implication still. For if we doubt Coleridge's claim — as some do — that 'Kubla Khan' is merely a 'fragment', the more do we acknowledge its completed, albeit fictional, greatness. Whereas for the more disciplined Thomas, writing assiduously and with concentration, the poem is seemingly lost, and turns into another one, 'A Person from Porlock', about the first poem's very failure. For Thomas — and thanks to Coleridge — the resulting poem is about the interruption of creativity itself.

And so finally, somewhat by chance, this talk may even have turned out more unified than I could have hoped for... "The eternal, nameless caller at the door" could be either the inner conscience which ceaselessly prods us, or the bearer of a 'divine dictation'. And similarly then, if some poems are divinely dictated, others may be divinely interrupted. As to the specifically Christian ethos, Thomas's foetal, even transvestite imagery — the male big with impending birth — may convey a vulnerable tenderness, in honestly conceding the inwardness of both poetic creativity and of its interruption. Thomas's poem seems to me profound indeed. But Coleridge's has to be even greater by

¹⁴ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by E.L. Griggs, Oxford 1956-1957, volume I page 643

the very evasion and excuse-making, more tender because more vulnerable, which appears in the Preface in such detail and therefore such willing self-exposure. Whatever the truth of that, I think this poem, 'A Person from Porlock', is Thomas's sincere tribute to 'Kubla Khan', a very great poem by a very great poet; a sentiment which we doubtless share.¹⁵

¹⁵ This is a slightly adjusted version of a lecture given at the Coleridge Study Weekend ('Coleridge's Religious Imagination') at Kilve Adult Education Centre, Somerset, in September 2008. During the paper's actual delivery grateful acknowledgement was made to David Fairer, Mary Wedd, Pamela Woof and others, who earlier in the day had made certain points in their papers or ensuing discussions, on some points also then raised in the present paper. This acknowledgement is gladly repeated here.