Book Reviews

Editorial

Two Centuries of *Kubla Khan*

Jeffrey W. Barbeau

LAST YEAR, THE FRIENDS OF COLERIDGE CELEBRATED the bicentenary of the 1816 publication of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. Through visual arts, walks, talks, competitions, film and publications, the Friends explored Coleridge's "vision in a dream," bringing renewed attention to one of the great works of Romantic literature. The project was ambitious and successfully reached a wide range of newcomers and specialists alike. I encourage readers to review the "Imagined Worlds" report to the Arts Council and Justin Shepherd's excellent *In Xanadu: A Companion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Kubla Khan* on the Friends' website.

Kubla Khan remains, of course, one of the most studied compositions in Coleridge's Collected Works. For two centuries, readers have debated its compositional origins, literary debts, language, themes, and publication history. Readers have interpreted the poem in disparate ways: an exploration of the process of imagination, an homage to Arabic-Islamic philosophy, and a sexualization of West Country landscape, to name but a few. Some memorable studies have even become synonymous with the poem, perhaps none more than John Livingston Lowes' oft-cited *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (1927).

Lowes memorably charts the genesis of *Kubla Khan* in an exhaustive exploration of the mind of the poet and the act of poetic composition. Reflecting on his own process of discovery—"a quest which began with a strange footprint caught sight of accidentally just off the beaten track became in the end an absorbing adventure along the ways which the imagination follows in dealing with its multifarious materials"[1]—Lowes offers a meditation on the power of mind to shape images and ideas from chaos to order:

> But there is more. The panorama was set in motion and unrolled without my will. For the moment I simply allowed the images to stream. Then I deliberately assumed control. For when, an hour later, I came back to write, I saw that here, like manna from heaven, was grist for my mill. The sentence about the world of images at the centre of which we live stood already on the page, and the skeleton of a plan was in my head. And with the play of free associations fresh in my mind, a new agency was interposed … It is the stuff of which life weaves patterns on its loom; and poetry, which is life enhanced and glorified, employs it too in fashioning more rarely beautiful designs. Intensified and sublimated and controlled though they be, the ways of the creative faculty are the universal ways of that streaming yet consciously directed something which we know … as life.

---

[1] John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), 3.

> Creative genius, in plainer terms, works through processes which are common to our kind, but these processes are superlatively enhanced. The subliminal agencies are endowed with an extraordinary potency; the faculty which conceives and executes operates with sovereign power; and the two blend in untrammeled interplay. There is always in genius, I imagine, the element which Goethe, who knew whereof he spoke, was wont to designate as 'the Dæmonic.' But in genius of the highest order that sudden, incalculable, and puissant energy which pours up from the hidden depths is controlled by a will which serves a vision—the vision which sees in chaos the potentiality of Form.[2]

Kubla Khan, in such a light, emerges as a poem on the capacity of the mind to create by re-creation—"the stuff of which life weaves patterns on its loom."

If Lowes discovered multiplicity in the stream of images in *Kubla Khan* by division, then John Beer restored the "enchanted forest" through a new depiction of spiritual and intellectual harmony. In Beer's *Coleridge the Visionary* (1959), the diversity of the poem reveals an intense energy disclosing a profound and singular unity: "It will always remain possible to enjoy it as a simple stream of images, and to ignore the opportunity which it affords of exploring the intricacies of Coleridge's visionary world."[3] At stake, however, was not only the meaning of vision but also the concept of genius. For Beer, in many ways building on Lowes' study, Kubla's genius becomes an emblem of creativity and even a symbol for the use and abuse of power in the world:

> The palace which the daemons built for themselves is a characteristic fruit of daemonic energies, and it helps us to see Kubla Khan's true nature. He has been seen, by Humphry House and others, as the poet in action, but it seems clear that he is much more than that. He is nearer to the ancient Eastern priests who were at one and the same time 'kings, pontiffs, judges, astronomers, surveyors, artists and physicians.' He personifies genius in all its forms: and his genius is the manifestation of daemonic powers.
>
> Nevertheless, it would be wrong to see Kubla as representing the highest type of genius. Coleridge thought that Napoleon was a genius, but he did not approve of him. When he spoke of Napoleon as building a Tartar empire, or of Timur Khan as being, like Napoleon, an agent of God, he did not intend the comparison to be flattering to either party. He thought of Napoleon with respect, but not with admiration. … In the *Philosophical Lectures*, Coleridge says that to have a genius is to live in the universal, and thus to know no self except that which is reflected from around one….
>
> This is not the genius of Napoleon, however: on the contrary, he is 'the evil genius of our planet.' … Men of absolute genius are on the

[2] Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, 431–32.
[3] J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), 276.

> whole contented, because they exist between thought and reality: they live in an intermundium of which their own living spirit supplies the substance, and their imagination the ever-varying form, and are therefore self-sufficing. … In the men of commanding genius, these longings become daemonic urges. They have to force their preconceptions upon the world without, in order to present them back to their own view with a satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness and individuality…
>
> In other words, the man of commanding genius has an ambivalent nature, which moulds itself to the demands of the age. When Coleridge spoke of Timur Khan as being, like Napoleon, an agent of God, he was ascribing to him, not divine virtue, but the function of God's scourge—that of 'the shaping Spirit of Ruin', or the thunderbolt that will destroy the Palace of Mammon."[4]

Beer detects the commanding genius in a scene of apparent tranquility, revealing an unstable dialectic between an Edenic pleasure-dome and precarious, cold paradise: "Kubla Khan may seem a peaceful and prosperous ruler, but his garden is not and cannot be the garden of Eden, just as the sacred river is not and cannot be the river of paradise."

Lowes and Beer are two luminous Coleridgeans of the last century but they are certainly not alone in expressing their wonderment. The late Christopher Rubinstein—a solicitor well-known to early attendees of the Coleridge Summer Conference (and memorably memorialized by Peter Larkin for his uncommon willingness to take up even the most contentious idea like "a terrier, shaking from it many an over-looked or under-valued insight")[5]—offered his thoughts on *Kubla Khan* in a review of Warren Stevenson's *A Study of Coleridge's Three Great Poems* (2001):

> [Stevenson] claims that the paradise envisaged by STC is genuine though subject to loss in the course of time, and is not the false paradise robustly advocated by John Beer in his *Coleridge the Visionary*. ... Arguably less persuasive, I suggest, are claims that STC's own disparagement of 'Kubla Khan' as primarily 'a psychological curiosity' represents a 'defensive tone (which) has to do with (his) constitutional diffidence' (25) …. I suggest a close study of the preface may give clues leading towards a fuller explanation of the motivation for the most unusual imaginative energy of which 'Kubla Khan' is the product. I ask: did STC wish to conceal a situation, apparently dangerous and discreditable, at the material time of composition of his 'A vision in a dream.'? The presence of the labyrinth where the critic faces multiple choices of what STC is likely to have had most in mind when initially and finally composing 'Kubla Khan'—over what extensive period of time now seems impossible to ascertain—is

[4] Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, 226–28.
[5] Peter Larkin, "Christopher Rubinstein (1929–2005)," *The Coleridge Bulletin* ns 26 (2005): 96–97.

perhaps here at its most forbidding."[6]

As Larkin notes, Rubinstein invokes a host of questions that remain unanswered, and may well be unanswerable.[7] And so it is that Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* continues to elicit interpretations and inspire conversation to this day.

* * *

In the current collection of reviews, readers will find that new and even daring things may be said about Coleridge and his works. James Engell explains his delight in the appearance of a seemingly impossible accomplishment—writing on the Ancient Mariner with fresh insight and even delight—in his review of J. C. C. Mays' *Coleridge's Ancient Mariner*. Gregory Leadbetter shows how a new edition of Wordsworth's *Poems, in Two Volumes* has the potential to broaden context and deepen reading of Wordsworth's works. Imagination continues to fascinate readers, too, as three recent studies reveal. Murray Evans considers the possibilities and perils of interdisciplinary work in his review of two books in religion and literature, while Allison Dushane considers how Coleridge's theory of imagination may contribute to contemporary discussion of philosophy of mind. Yet not all studies lead down well-worn paths of criticism. Christine Woody reviews Heidi Thomson's study of Coleridge's little-known contributions to the *Morning Post*, and Adam Neikirk considers David Ruderman's fresh look at the idea of infancy in Romantic literature. Finally, Ralf Haekel comments on a new resource for understanding Coleridge and his circle in pan-Romantic perspective in a review of Martin Garrett's *A Romantics Chronology, 1780–1832*.

Two centuries later, more work remains. In upcoming issues, *The Coleridge Bulletin* plans to publish reviews of a number of recent books on Coleridge and the nineteenth century.

- Joel Harter reviews *Mariner: A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (2017) by Malcolm Guite
- Paul Cheshire reviews *A Modern Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits* (2015) by Andrea Timár
- Katy Beavers reviews *Radical Contra-Diction: Coleridge, Revolution, Apostasy* (2016) by Björn Bosserhoff
- Philip Aherne reviews *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of Disability* (2016) by Emily Stanbeck
- Gene Stelzig reviews *This Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer* (2016) by Richard Holmes

In time, we may discover that these authors set the pace for a new century of Coleridge scholarship. And for that, I think we can all continue to be grateful.

---

[6] Christopher Rubinstein, Review of *A Study of Coleridge's Three Great Poems: Christabel, Kubla Khan and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Warren Stevenson (Edward Mellen, 2001) in *The Coleridge Bulletin* ns 22 (2003): 91–94.

[7] Christopher Rubinstein, "Along the Road to Xanadu," *The Wordsworth Circle* 30.2 (1999): 108–12.