

Mental Imagery and the Inaccessible ‘Gaps’ of ‘Kubla Khan’

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AMONG COLERIDGE’S MOST NOTABLE WORKS, critics have singled out ‘Kubla Khan’, time and time again, as a poem of particular interest to the study of reader response. Reuven Tsur’s *‘Kubla Khan’—Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality, and Cognitive Style* (2006), for example, notably positions the poem as a ‘hypnotic’ work, whose ‘obtrusive rhythms’ produce a heightened emotional response in the reader.¹ Meanwhile, Alan C. Purves proposes the poem itself as a model for research into the process of reader response.²

‘Kubla Khan’ was—whether intentionally or not—singled out by Coleridge to similar effect. Famously held back from publication, then deemed a ‘psychological curiosity’ upon its appearance, Coleridge felt a clear need to position ‘Kubla Khan’ in relation to its prospective audience. Once published, he would go on contextualizing the work, whether printed or read aloud in company, in a disclamatory manner that, some have argued, invited his audience ‘not to dismiss the poem as a “psychological curiosity”’ but rather to engage themselves actively in narrativizing it.³ This perceived invitation has transformed ‘Kubla Khan’ over time into a poem uniquely bound up in modeling and theorizing the very nature of imaginative and creative production (particularly as regards the reader’s mental response to the poem as a text). Whether for its enticing narrative framework, the poem’s accessible length, or its fantastically exotic imagery, ‘Kubla Khan’ has since become one of Coleridge’s most popular works. Indeed, it is often listed as one the most anthologized English poems of all time, eliciting countless new responses from readers each year.⁴ As a poem at least partly concerned with relating ‘a vision’ that ‘once I saw’ (*PW* I.1 514), ‘Kubla Khan’ cannot help but function, as it greets each new set of eyes, as a test of its own ability to transmit the images it enfolds—a test that presents itself regardless of the reader’s contextual knowledge of Coleridge or the poem.

Coleridge’s inclusion of a narrative framework to ‘Kubla Khan’—embodied in macro-form by his 1816 preface and in micro-form via the work’s subtitle, ‘OR, A VISION IN A DREAM’ and ‘A FRAGMENT’—rounds the work into

¹ Reuven Tsur, *‘Kubla Khan’—Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality and Cognitive Style* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006).

² Alan C. Purves, “‘That Sunny Dome: Those Caves of Ice’: A Model for Research in Reader Response,” *College English* 40.7 (1979): 812 (802–12). Purves praises the poem as an attempt at the kind of poietichamony that consists in the ‘reconciliation of opposites’, the kind of reconciliation that ‘lives at the heart of literature’ and which mirrors the ‘tension that is response to literature’.

³ David S. Hogsette, ‘Eclipsed by the Pleasure Dome: Poetic Failure in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”’, *Romanticism on the Net* 5 (1997); see also, Pramod K. Nayar, “‘Kubla Khan’ and Its Narratives of Possible Worlds,” *Changing English* 20.4 (2013): 404–8, for an example of how ‘Kubla Khan’ has been interpreted not simply as being framed by an overarching narrative structure, but as ‘a poem about narrative’ that ‘specifically focuses on the narrative construction of possible worlds, or even utopian worlds’.

⁴ As recently as 2017, Emily Temple of LitHub posited ‘Kubla Khan’—based on a survey of 20 anthologies of poetry published between 1992 and 2016—as among ‘The Most Anthologized Poems of the Last 25 Years’.

something the reader must attempt to make sense of both narratively and visually. But where some suggest that this narrative framework molds the poem into an ‘allegory’ of poetic failure,⁵ I offer a reader-response and cognitive literary reading of ‘Kubla Khan’, arguing that the poem’s inconsistent Lyric ‘I’ speaker transforms the poem into an experience of imaginative stimulation and frustration, becoming a voice that entices then denies the reader’s attempts to take on the imaginative work of visualizing the poem.⁶ The poem thereby invites then thwarts readers’ attempts to fully absorb its images and make them their own, whether removed from or embedded within its clarifying context.

Setting the Terms: Iser and Kuzmičová

In an effort to describe how the poem’s various textual elements (and the reader’s response to these elements) either assist or interfere in the reader’s efforts to become fully immersed in the poem, I suggest the application of reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser’s concepts of the ‘virtual self’/‘alien self’ along with cognitive literary scholar Anežka Kuzmičová’s spectrum of immersive mental imagery. When read through the lens of reader-response theory, the poem’s inconsistent speaker-narrator—an entity one might call its ‘conscientious interjector’—can be said to grant readers inconsistent access to the poem’s ‘gaps’. Iser characterizes such ‘gaps’ as moments when readers must ‘fill in’ missing information within the text. In such a process, readers form a complete, though not constant, ‘virtual dimension’ or big picture of the work.⁷ For Iser, the successful construction of a virtual dimension by readers marks ‘the coming together of text and imagination’ and leads to an experience of ‘gestalt’, which is the true immersion of readers within the fictional world of a creative text: ‘the point at which the text becomes an experience’.⁸

Considering ‘Kubla Khan’ from the perspective of embodied cognition, the poem’s fluctuating, interjecting speaker can also be said to frustrate readers’ attempts to experience what Kuzmičová terms ‘enactment imagery’. The most immersive category of mental imagery in existence, enactment imagery enables readers to participate ‘directly’ in the imagined visual world of the poem through perceived sensory experiences.⁹ To clarify, Kuzmičová proposes the

⁵ Hogsette, ‘Eclipsed by the Pleasure Dome: Poetic Failure in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”’, paragraph 11.

⁶ Put simply, the ‘Lyric I’ of lyric poetry is the “I” voice of the poem’s speaker—the voice that the reader imagines they can take up, or the persona whose position they ‘may come ritualistically to occupy’ while reading. See Jonathan Culler, ‘Theory of the Lyric’, *Nordisk poesi* 2, no. 2 (2017): 126 (119–133), for more.

⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 40.

⁸ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 279. Iser suggests that there can be no ‘gestalt’ without the formation of the virtual dimension, but that there can be an emerging, incomplete virtual dimension without successful gestalt. The average reader seems to naturally seek consistency within a text and just as naturally to impose it upon a text and the virtual world it engenders in their mind. Success in this regard is what allows ‘gestalt’, even when temporary and the result of the reader’s deliberately selective management of particular ‘gaps’. See Elise Ann Earthman, ‘Creating the Virtual Work: Readers’ Processes in Understanding Literary Texts’, *Research in the Teaching of English* 26.4 (1992): 351–84, for a discussion of that gap-filling as fundamental to reading as a cognitive process.

⁹ Anežka Kuzmičová, ‘Literary Narrative and Mental Imagery: A View from Embodied Cognition’, *Style* 48.3 (2014): 287 (275–293). Kuzmičová draws a line between lyric and narrative experiences of mental imagery within her dissertation on the same subject: ‘Mental Imagery in the Experience of Literary Narrative—Views from Embodied Cognition’. As the primary focus of this paper is point of view/voice and its effect on the reader’s cognitive experience of the text, I feel justified in applying Kuzmičová’s work broadly here.

existence of four types of mental imagery—in order from least to most immersive: rehearsal imagery, speech imagery, description imagery, and enactment imagery. These types can be broadly classified into two domains: the referential and the verbal. The referential domain encompasses mental imagery experiences that feel immediate, visual, and immersive in quality. The verbal domain, on the other hand, encompasses mental imagery experiences that involve the reader's perception of the text as a medium that one must cognitively work through *before* one can imagine any sensory participation in the fictional world of the text.¹⁰ The reader enters a work through the verbal domain as a 'speaker', then becomes a 'listener' as the 'voice' of the text takes over from their own narrating 'head voice'. As one's knowledge of the text increases and awareness of the text as a medium decreases, the reader slowly progresses into the referential domain, where the images and sensory offerings of the text are experienced as if the reader were a removed 'visualizer'. When the reader's awareness of the text reaches its lowest point, one begins to respond somatically to the text as an 'experiencer'—as if the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile offerings of the text are happening to him or her directly.

Though they may seem at first quite disparate, Iser's and Kuzmičová's theoretical frameworks are readily unified through the application of Iser's concepts of the 'real' or 'virtual self' and the 'alien self' to Kuzmičová's spectrum of immersive mental imagery. Iser suggests that the positioning of oneself as an abstract 'I, the reader' in relation to the 'alien self' or 'I, the voice/felt presence of the text', is a negotiation that all readers make, a necessary negotiation if one hopes to experience 'gestalt'.¹¹ What Iser calls the 'alien me' or alien self is similar to what an individual might experience as a 'head voice', the speaking or narrating voice of the text at work within the mind of the silent reader.¹² To restate this dynamic in Kuzmičová's terms: when engaging a written work, the reader constantly negotiates an imagined spatial relationship between the perceived 'voice' or presence of the text and one's own bodily presence, a presence that sometimes manages to participate sensorily in the imagery that a reader's brain constructs while reading.¹³

As we will soon see through a reading of 'Kubla Khan', the relationship of the reader to the 'voice' of the text is critical. The reader begins any textual encounter slightly disoriented, seeking details, formal boundaries, and limits to the world just entered. The reader fumbles for secure footing in relation to this

¹⁰ Kuzmičová stresses the link between the cognitive labor required to achieve certain kinds of mental imagery and the reader's potential embodied response: 'The distinctive corporeal feature of rehearsal imagery vis-à-vis speech imagery is that it is consciously felt to deploy the reader's vocal cords and the muscles in her mouth and throat . . .' ('Literary Narrative and Mental Imagery', 286).

¹¹ Iser describes the relationship in spatial terms, as one of 'two levels . . . which are never completely cut off from each other' (Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 293).

¹² For a discussion of the 'head voice' as a concept positioned within embodied cognition, see Kuzmičová, 'Literary Narrative and Mental Imagery', 277.

¹³ 'The presence of an experiencer (or at least the possibility of inferring one on the part of the reader)', or the reader's ability to 'enact the character's embodied stance vis-à-vis this something' is 'a pre-requisite of enactment imagery' (Kuzmičová, 'Literary Narrative and Mental Imagery', 282).

world until some sense of 'where' or placement can be achieved. This positioning is at least partly dependent upon knowing 'who' the alien self of a given text is. At the start of any work, 'who' the alien self is can only be defined as someone separate from the virtual self. The initial voice of the text cannot be the voice of the reader; the two are distinguished by the reader's lack of knowledge about the world of the text. But as the reader gathers information about the alien self—what kind of narration this entity takes up, what character it assumes (if a first-person narrator), what this entity seems to know or not know about the world of the work—the reader can begin to securely place himself or herself in relation to the alien self. After an initial 'situating' of the selves has taken place, the reader begins to grasp what gaps are accessible within the text. Once this is known, so long as the text is consistent, the reader can go about closing these gaps, forming a cohesive virtual dimension or picture of the work and narrowing the distance between virtual self and alien self. This progression, when successful, will culminate in moments of gestalt and enactment imagery. However, any unexpected alteration in the felt/perceived presence of the alien self will be highly disruptive to this process. So long as the reader knows who the alien self 'is', the reader can work towards identifying with the alien self to the point of complete immersion. If the reader is abruptly confronted with a shift in the alien self, the reader loses sight of 'who' this entity is and where one 'stands' in relation to it. When such a loss occurs, the reader feels suddenly removed from an immediate experience of the narrative.¹⁴

Into Xanadu: Applying Iser and Kužmičová

Now that we have set our terms, we can embark upon a reader-response and cognitive literary reading of the poem. As previously hinted, the poem's unique narrative framework and vivid visual content lends itself immediately to such an analysis. Even upon a first encounter with the textual world of 'Kubla Khan', the reader quickly anticipates a reading experience that should result in gestalt (the reader's felt participation in the virtual world of the poem as an immersive experience) or some kind of enactment imagery. Though the contemporary reader may avoid the contextual conditioning represented by Coleridge's Preface, the subtitle alone is sufficient to tempt the reader to undertake meaning-making and visualization immediately.¹⁵ This is a 'dream', after all, presented to the reader *by someone*, calling the reader to act as interpreter of the images provided. This dream is not the reader's, therefore it is only in relation to the speaker that the reader can determine how much

¹⁴ It is important to clarify that the alien self/head voice is not experienced as a constant throughout a work. Kužmičová suggests that head voice is only a function of the two kinds of verbal imagery and is experienced periodically as they arise. Therefore, the 'alien self' is not permanently associated with any one character or speaker. It is, rather, the encounter of the vitality of the text as an 'other'/felt presence, which shifts throughout one's experience of a text. The 'alien self' may often take the form of the narrator or speaker, as this is the textual entity the reader's 'virtual/real self' is most consistently perceived as being in relation to.

¹⁵ For a discussion of how the 'The person from Porlock' has become inextricably associated with 'Kubla Khan' and has also come to 'stand for the interruption of inspiration', see Laura Mooneyham White, 'The Person from Porlock in "Kubla Khan" and Later Texts: Inspiration, Agency, and Interruption', *Connotations* 16 (2006), 172 (172–93).

creative freedom to exercise in constructing a virtual dimension of the poem (for example, what gaps the reader might fill and what interpretive liberties to take). It is also only in relation to the speaker that the reader can determine where best to place oneself within the imagined virtual world of the text. Consequently, the reader enters the poem *seeking* this speaker all the more earnestly.

Coleridge's speaker is elusive and inconstant, however, presenting a fluctuating point of view throughout the poem. For much of the first stanza, the most the reader 'knows' of the alien self is that the speaker is removed. Instead, a dispassionate, godlike voice appears, presenting the dream-to-come as a scene of mythic, once-told-of, grandeur: 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree.' (PW I.1 512). This speaker does not yet appear as 'present' in the poem in any way, and the reader is therefore free to fill in 'who' the speaker is by omission: it is no one—a vague, omniscient narrator who may offer some slight indication of presence here and there, but who will do little to alarm or destabilize the reader's imaginative experience of the work.¹⁶ Knowing this, little space needs to be left to accommodate the poem's speaker/alien self, and little care needs to be taken to work around potential movement within the poem. This speaker is someone the reader imagines it is possible to see *through*. Identifying with the alien self, therefore, becomes quite simple within the first stanza—so far, this entity possesses no specific traits to identify with. This transparent speaker enables the reader to more easily view the text as transparent, to move quickly along the immersion spectrum of mental imagery: from the verbal domain, wherein the reader is highly aware of the text as medium, to the first stage of the referential domain, wherein the reader can begin to experience himself or herself as involved in the world of the work. The reader's mental imagery experience of the first stanza might therefore be described as follows: the reader begins by hearing one's own head voice as narrator of the poem, only to find this voice quickly replaced with the unknown voice of a third-person speaker. If no outside distractions ensue, the reader may momentarily lose awareness of the text altogether upon reaching the easily imagined line, 'Enfolding sunny spots of greenery'.¹⁷ Though the reader remains slightly removed from the imagery induced by the first stanza—witnessing the objects described as though from within the same world, but not quite able to reach out and touch them—full immersion and direct sensory experience of the setting feels imminent.

¹⁶ See Sonja Zeman, 'Parameters of Narrative Perspectivization: The Narrator', *Open Library of Humanities* 6.2 (2020): 28 (1–33), which discusses how readers establish their relationship to a work's speaker/narrator by first determining the narrator's perspective, 'a perspective that has to be established by linguistic cues'. For a reframing of 'imaginative resistance' to a text as 'narrator accommodation' and response to a perceived shift in the reader's relationship to a work's speaker/narrator, see Daniel Altshuler and Emar Maier, 'Death on the Freeway: Imaginative Resistance as Narrator Accommodation', in *Making Worlds Accessible: Festschrift for Angelika Kratzer*, ed. Ilaria Frana, Paula Menendez Benito, and Rajesh Bhatt (Amherst: UMass ScholarWorks, 2020): 2.

¹⁷ PW I.1 513. Each reader's experience of the text can differ, so this is a proposed progression of mental imagery within the stanza. It is possible that readers experience 'description imagery' slightly before reaching this precise line via a different image. Regardless, once they reach this point in the poem, the sun and trees are visible before the reader's eyes as is (very likely) some version of the 'pleasure dome'.

A similar progression is possible within the third stanza. As in the first stanza, the reader immediately knows 'who' this speaker is: it is the 'I' who the reader might have expected to encounter at the beginning of the poem, but who did not emerge there: 'A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw' (*PW* I.1 513). As in the first stanza, this positioning line is followed by an orienting colon. This alien self, then, is the speaker recounting his dream, his vision; it is Coleridge, perhaps, though, the reader's familiarity (or lack thereof) with Coleridge will not prevent successful orientation relative to him. What matters is whether or not the reader's general sense of 'who' this speaker is will afford him or her sufficient access to the text's gaps from that point forward. Though the reader is not granted much information about this narrating 'I' within the initial lines of the third stanza, the reader knows enough about first-person narration to understand that any single 'I' speaker (in life or within a text) can never know everything there is to know about a given world. This 'I' then, is someone who the reader imagines it is possible to see *past*. In recognizing the inevitably incomplete knowledge of the first-person speaker, the reader can assume the role of gap filling and gap management with authority, understanding that while certain gaps may be made inaccessible through the first-person presence of the speaker, other gaps will remain permanently open.¹⁸ The clearly established first-person speaker allows the reader to absorb the third stanza as the disjointed musings of a first-person, Lyric 'I', who is openly but imperfectly relating what they recall of a personal vision or dream.

Thus, with many presumed layers of narrative distance now erected between the reader and the original content of this 'vision', and with the speaker's imagined first-person bias and selective blindness to account for, the reader understands that little is likely to come from doing anything more than absorbing the images as they are presented, accepting that there is likely no true cohesive sense to be made of them. This acceptance breaks down the reader's resistance to the text as a medium, and the reader quickly becomes capable of experiencing lines such as, 'she play'd, / Singing of Mount Abora' and 'that dome in air' (*PW* I.1 514), through the lens of description imagery. By the end of the stanza, the reader is almost certainly experiencing the line, 'His flashing eyes, his floating hair!' in a vivid manner, envisioning a man floating before his or her eyes in a state of bright-eyed inspiration—clearly visible though not fully tangible. The reader may also feel momentarily compelled to weave 'a circle round him thrice' with a finger in the air—the closest the reader comes to an experience of enactment imagery within the poem. In the case of both the first and third stanzas of 'Kubla Khan', the reader feels that a sufficient number of textual gaps are open for him or her to fill. This is because, in both cases, the

¹⁸ For an exploration of first-person narration within the context of narrative focalization, see William F. Edmiston, 'Focalization and the First-Person Narrator: A Revision of the Theory', *Poetics Today* 10.4 (1989): 729. Edmiston suggests that the narratological concept of focalization must be recontextualized to account for the first-person point of view, wherein the narrator (who is supposedly 'withholding' certain information about the world of the text) is also a character within this world; someone who, for the purposes of the narrative, cannot be said to withhold missing or inaccessible information.

reader knows who the speaker/alien self is and where the virtual self stands in relation to them. If either this fully realized 'I' or the removed third-person narrator of the first stanza were consistent throughout the poem, the reader would be more likely to experience partial immersion, and both enactment imagery and gestalt might become possible in select places.

'But ol'—Thwarting the dream of such consistency, the second stanza thrusts an interjecting voice upon the reader (*PW* II.1 676). Prior to this interjection, the reader has only been granted one word that might foreshadow the sudden introduction of a present speaker. Lines eight and ten begin, 'And here were gardens' and 'here were forests', with the word, 'here' standing out from other positional language of the first stanza ('Where'). 'Here', unable to be misconstrued as a disembodied positional word, quietly asks the reader to engage in the creation of description imagery and to imagine himself or herself as enacting a pointing gesture within the world of the poem. At this early stage of reading, the reader does not yet have the proximity to the alien self nor the positional security within the virtual dimension to comfortably imagine making such a gesture. Because the reader cannot yet imagine making this gesture, they are forced to admit the possible presence of someone else within the world of the poem—someone embodied, taking up space where a third-person narrator would not.

Though an incredibly small and subtle bit of language, this single, 'here' destabilizes the reader's faith in the constancy of the perceived third-person speaker, so that when 'But ol' arrives, it signals a complete disruption of the imagined spatial relationship between the virtual and alien self. Suddenly, here is someone: an interjecting 'I' that has waited in silence long past the polite moment to announce its presence, thrusting upon the reader all the jarring displeasure of finding oneself no longer alone within a private space of imagination. This violating, disorienting intrusion thwarts an identification of the virtual self with the alien self and takes the reader out of the act of imagining. The newly revealed alien self then proceeds to take the imaginative reins within the poem, telling the virtual self/reader how the world of 'Kubla Khan' ought to be interpreted and experienced. This stranger of a speaker—this conscientious interjector—immediately takes up the invitation to gesture, represented by that single 'here' from the first stanza, and begins pointing with an aggressive arm at 'that deep romantic chasm' (*PW* I.1 513). The effect of these moments together marks the reader's loss of access to the gaps of the poem to this unknown intertextual presence, a presence which then immediately moves to exclude the reader from an immediate and immersive experience of the poem's virtual world. This interjecting speaker introduces a shocking new landscape element known only to themselves—a chasm—prompting the reader to ask certain questions: How deep? Why romantic? Where is it precisely? The reader barely has time to approach these new textual gaps before they are filled in by the speaker in increasingly specific ways: the chasm slants down a hill, it is both 'holy and enchanted', and a metaphorical distraction arrives in the form of a wailing woman and her demon-lover.

The abrupt disruption of the virtual/alien selves' positional relationship alters all of the reader's remaining encounters with the language of the second stanza. Figurative elements that would otherwise open space within the poem and invite imaginative interpretation by the reader, such as the similes, 'Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail, / Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail', do not do so. Instead, these similes feel micromanaging—even possessive—clarifications on the part of the speaker that serve to maintain an unchallenged control over the imaginative potential of the text. Just as the reader begins to lean in, imagining these fragments as bits of rebounding hail, the speaker then shifts the image, prompting the reader to instead imagine bits of 'chaffy grain'. This double simile blurs the image in the reader's mind even as it forms, lending the line a dreamlike haziness while holding the reader back from full imaginative abandon. The result is that no clear image takes shape in the mind of the reader, who consequently feels all the more removed from the imagined world of the work. 'Kubla Khan' evokes a virtual world which, on the whole, one experiences like the fragmented vision Coleridge's narrative frame promises: it is a dream that one observes and would very much like to enter, but which can only be absorbed, confusedly and frustratedly, from an insurmountable distance.

Conclusions: Why 'Kubla Khan'?

There is a timelessness to 'Kubla Khan', a fairy-tale quality that underlies its dream-like construction. But where a familiar fairy-tale might lull the child into tranquil, imaginative abandon, 'Kubla Khan' refuses to let its reader rest. If nothing else, a cognitive literary reading of the poem, grounded in reader-response theory, gives form to the mental frustration engendered by Coleridge's decision to distinguish 'Kubla Khan' from his other works (by classifying it as something *else*, a 'psychological curiosity'). Perhaps, in setting the poem apart, Coleridge meant to frustrate his readers. On the other hand, perhaps he simply consented to the publication of a 'fragment' that had long frustrated *him*. But if 'frustration' was all that the poem offered, it seems unlikely that generations of readers would have returned to it again and again, seeking imaginative fulfillment.

As 'Kubla Khan' frustrates, it also excites; it tempts as much as it thwarts. A cognitive literary reading of the poem helps to explain the mechanism of the reader's excitement; it offers one possible process by which the language of the poem can be said to open and close the imaginative doors of the mind. A cognitive literary reading also explains why 'Kubla Khan' remains so universally thrilling to read: it is the kind of work that, in its very fragmentation, overcomes the separations of prior knowledge and educational background. It breaks through immediately to the naked mind of the reader, inviting that mind, as if confronted with an ever-shifting puzzle, to try and make it whole. In this way, the process of reading 'Kubla Khan' feels, perhaps, like the process of imagining *with* Coleridge. By following the starts and stops, the twists and turns of his visual imagination alongside our own—succeeding where he asks

us to succeed, and failing where he fails to leave us room—we come as close to the poet as time and distance will ever allow. In the reading of 'Kubla Khan', another presence reveals itself in a manner both inconsistent and striking, mirroring the bright flashes of recognition, the sudden meeting of the eyes, that characterize a true meeting of the minds.