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What of “Kubla Khan”?

“Kubla Khan” is a poem that has been looked at mostly for what it has to say of poetic inspiration. An anthologized introduction to the poem states that it “has mythic status as an enactment as well as description of genius, creative aspiration and the longing to recover Edenic harmony” (Coleridge, “Kubla Khan” 183). It is true that the poem bewilders many because of its language and images, but it is not a complete story. It is a fragment. Since this fragmented piece was published with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Preface” to the work itself, it is difficult not to interpret the poem without its preface. The “Preface” is an attempt to explain the poem’s incompleteness. Out of the many critical approaches that have been used to interpret “Kubla Khan,” it is essential to follow one that also accounts for the poem’s “Preface.”

The preface to “Kubla Khan” was published along with the poem for the first time in 1816. In it, Coleridge explains that he had been in “ill health, [and] had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton” (185). He had been reading from “Purchas’s Pilgrimage” when he fell asleep and dreamt for three hours about Kubla Khan and the vision described in the poem. After waking up, he took “his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved” (185). His writing was interrupted by someone who had come from Porlock and, as a result, Coleridge was unable to vividly recall the inspired lines and images from the dream. The “Preface,” then, serves as an explanation to the fragmentary nature of “Kubla Khan.” Among other things, it tells us that the inspiration was cut off by an outside

source. This paper looks to explain how the “Preface” has become part of the poem as it expresses the poet’s mind and shows him at work during the creation of the poem. First, I will describe the nature of the work by variants. Then, I will look at major critical approaches, only to show why the “Preface” matters.

In 1934, a document now known as the Crewe manuscript was found, and it also contained the “Preface” and the poem. This manuscript had been given to Southey by Coleridge, who wrote it sometime before the 1816 publication. Many argue as to the source of “Kubla Khan’s” inspiration. In the Crewe manuscript, Coleridge states that he wrote the poem in “a sort of Reverie,” which is very different from the 1816 claim that he had had a “three-hour dream” (Fruman 338). Another difference between these two prefaces deals with the drug that Coleridge had taken before he wrote it. The Crewe manuscript talks about two grains of opium while the 1816 version just mentions “an anodyne” (Coleridge, “Kubla Khan” 185). Consequently, the reader must ask himself or herself whether the poem is a product of a dream or the effect of opium. The “Preface” tells us that we must interpret the poem as an incomplete work of imaginative creation, but it does not tell us whether we should consider it a result of vision or of drug use.

Other differences between the Crewe manuscript and the 1816 publication also occur within the poem itself, and not just the “Preface.” For example, the plural “waves” (32) and “caves” (34) in the 1816 edition are actually singular nouns in the Crewe manuscript. Coleridge made the changes to these in the 1816 version for rhythmic and visual purposes. There are also various other changes in one word or one letter throughout the poem. This shows that Coleridge went over the text a few times, and as Norman Fruman asks, “may not this text be a reworked draft of perhaps many early attempts?” (343). Such a question makes us think whether “Kubla

Khan” should be thought of entirely as an attempt without much consciousness. If this is the case, then we must look at approaches that do not exclusively take the “Preface” as a given.

One of the major critical interpretations of “Kubla Khan” has to do with the embodiment of archetypal opposition. Kubla Khan decrees a “stately pleasure-dome” (2) to be built in Xanadu. The terrain in Xanadu was “fertile ground” (6) and contained “forests ancient as the hills” (10). Interestingly, these opening lines of the poem are giving an opposition in the setting—one of artificiality versus naturalness. That opening paragraph also shows the opposition between water and earth, in that it depicts the “river” (3) and the “sea” (5), as well as the “ground” (6) and the “greenery” (11). Throughout the poem there are also images of heaven and hell, wild grain and cultivated gardens, and light and darkness. One particular image becomes very peculiar and the poet describes it as “a miracle of rare device” (35) because it is a “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice” (36). The image is repeated again a few lines later, but it evokes the opposition between light and darkness as well as warmth and cold.

Another approach to the poem involves its auditory effect more than the written one. The Romantic critic William Hazlitt stated that “we could repeat these lines to ourselves not the less often for not knowing the meaning of them” (qtd. in Holmes 434). He described the poem as nonsense verse in English and concluded that it sounded nice musically, but the text itself had no meaning. For Hazlitt, Coleridge was the best at making up nonsense. He states that Coleridge comes to no conclusion in his poem, on top of the fact that the work itself is a fragment. Furthermore, Hazlitt blames Coleridge for doing little or nothing out of everything he is able to create in the poem. Thus this critical approach sides mostly with the fact that the poem is unfinished and that it only intrigues because it contains language that appeals to the ear.

A third approach to “Kubla Khan” is one of a dramatization of Coleridge’s theory of the imagination. For Coleridge, there was primary and secondary imagination. The primary imagination connects us with God as it displays His power, and in the poem it is the “mighty fountain” (19). The secondary imagination is the power to recreate the world. Coleridge notes that “It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead” (*Biographia Literaria* 1: 202). It is a process that “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates” (1: 202) and is shown by the river that runs “Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea” (4-5). Fancy, on the other hand, works with memory and recalls those things which have already been presented into the mind. It is “emancipated from the order of time and space,” and “must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (1: 202). Such is the case when Coleridge sees ancient China present in his mind and is able to recall, through association, the Khan’s decree, descriptions in “Purchas’s Pilgrimage,” and even allusions to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Fancy, therefore, allows the imagination to receive insight.

A significant critical approach is Norman Fruman’s sexual interpretation of “Kubla Khan.” Fruman explains: “A pleasure-dome, fertile ground, forests, caverns, a deep romantic chasm slanting down a hill . . . surely the sexual details now seem overwhelmingly to point in a single direction” (396). He goes on to explain that after the “woman wail[s] for her demon-lover” (15), Coleridge describes a sexual scene. In fact, Fruman further suggests that the images of “Kubla Khan” point towards an incestuous relation since there is a black woman towards the end of the poem, and interracial situations generally indicate incest (400). The sexual interpretation can also have something to do with Sara, Coleridge’s wife. Her physical relationship with Coleridge was not particularly strong, and that may have caused some of the sexual content found within the images of the poem.

“Kubla Khan” can also be viewed as a representation of Coleridge at work. Because it is a fragment, it shares some characteristics with other unfinished works of Coleridge, such as “Christabel.” There is no real conclusion to either work. But “Kubla Khan” does show a technique which Coleridge is used to utilizing—the use of a surrogate. Coleridge mentions that there was “an Abyssinian maid, / And on her dulcimer she played” (39-40) which brought him joy and “To such a deep delight ‘twould win me” (44). The black maid then becomes a surrogate for Coleridge by which he can experience high emotions that lead him to think and act in an elevated manner. For instance, he is always before Xanadu where a pleasure-dome is to be built, yet it is after he sees this surrogate maid that he “would build that dome in air, / That sunny dome!” (46-7) with “flashing eyes” and “floating air” (50). Thus he feels empowered to build something grand because of this surrogate. It is this last approach I agree with most.

After having seen the different major critical approaches to “Kubla Khan,” the last approach, which represents Coleridge at work, does not ignore the “Preface” entirely. Because Coleridge is at work, it means that the “Preface” he wrote has something to say about the work itself. It tells us *how* Coleridge was at work. As a result, the “Preface” has become a part of the poem, not only because it has been printed along with the poem frequently, but because it has formed a relationship with the poem. We need to account for it because it is not separate to the origin of the poem. Regardless of whether Coleridge had been under the influence of opium or in a profound sleep of three hours, both situations indicate the possibility of receiving a vision in which “images rose up before him as things” (“Kubla Khan” 185). This is in harmony with some of the lines in the poem. He recalls “That with music loud and long, / I would build that dome in air” (45-6). The music can be a traceable characteristic of a trance or influence which enables him to perform and go to work. Furthermore, the lines describing that “Kubla heard from far /

Ancestral voices prophesying war” (29-30) point another way in which Coleridge is receiving. Therefore, if we see the poem as a representation of Coleridge at work, we are led to seriously consider the claim that he is receiving a vision.

The poem itself has amazed readers for generations with its enchanting poetic language, a feature that is consistent with the genius of the natural poet. But Coleridge stresses in his *Biographia Literaria* that the gift of the natural poet cannot be learned:

Imagery (even taken from nature, much more when transplanted from books, as travels, voyages, and works of natural history); affecting incidents; just thoughts; interesting personal or domestic feelings; and with these the art of their combination or intertexture in the form of a poem; may all by incessant effort be acquired as a trade, by a man of talents and much reading...But the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of imagination...[and] can never be learned. (2: 14)

The natural poet reserves for himself the ability of producing melodic verse from the innate power of imagination. This mode of production is not unlike Coleridge’s own explanation in the “Preface” about the conceiving of “Kubla Khan,” where “all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (185). Despite his passive role as spectator, it is the final written result that stands out as his creation of poetic genius.

Those who argue against the inclusion of the “Preface” fail to recognize that the poem is the product of the genius of the imagination. The claim that Coleridge was dreaming at the time he received the poem’s images, along with the poetic language found in the poem itself, stress what Edward J. Ahearn calls “the intimate connection between ecstatic experience and poetic

creation” (43). Such a relationship is vital to Coleridge’s work ethic because it allows him to participate in an experience that is not only limited to the writing he is doing. The imagination of his poetic genius works in such a way that he must engage with the experience he describes. Thus the “Preface” is at the forefront of his work ethic, with which he would not have been able to create the poem. In looking at the Khan, the pleasure dome, Xanadu, and even the Abyssinian maid we must keep in mind why they were brought before us in the first place. They are not just a conglomeration of images separated as mere fact, but rather they represent Andrea Timár’s idea of engaging with history (174). For Coleridge the poem does not begin with the words, it begins in the mind and, thus, the visual engagement.

Perhaps the most influential contribution of the “Preface” to such an engaging poem is that it provides an opening in the poem’s resistance to interpretation. In this matter, however, it does not tell us the meaning of the poem, neither does it concede that the poem has one, but it opens a medium of interpretation pertinent to the poem as a whole. The “Preface” introduces the effect of imagination when in an unconscious state. When the images show up for the first time, “many elements, many levels of self-awareness, are missing or suppressed” (Holmes 216). The “Preface” explains the conditions of the origin of the poem and, therefore, ascribes a psychological theme to “Kubla Khan.” By considering this, the suggestion is made to the reader that the poem may make no sense since it comes from the same inner workings of the mind as dreams and visions come from. Consequently, the difficulty in finding connections between some of the images in the poem is not always chaotic when inputting the “Preface’s” claim of a dream as an explanation for the confusion.

Some may think that such a purpose to the “Preface” is a weak disclaimer, but the “Preface” prepares us for “Kubla Khan.” When Coleridge first received the images, he was, as

mentioned before, going through an experience. Because the poem itself was an experience for Coleridge, it is also imperative for the reader to engage in that experience. The reader then becomes the audience who is allowed to engage and react. Ahearn promotes this poetic experience by saying that it is “a positive function of the audience in contributing to the elaboration of the ecstasy” (52). Could there be a better way for Coleridge to show the reader how the poem works than by enabling the poem to work on us how it did for him? This is why the “Preface” has essentially become a part of the poem. It sets a mood of reverie, a mood conducive of being enchanted and swept away in vision. Without it, the experience would not be the same. Fruman points out that even “If we reject the influence of dream or reverie in the *technical elaboration* of so delicate and masterful a composition, there is still the possibility that the poem owes something—and perhaps something very important—to states in which the poet was not fully in control of his thought processes” (347). Thus it is important to note that what the “Preface” accomplishes in setting the mood affects the overall music and composition of the poem, since without it the poem is not the same.

“Kubla Khan” provides an engaging adventure for the reader, which is, I think, the poem’s most meaningful characteristic. We can apply different approaches to its poetic language and content. It is insightful to look at the archetypal binaries that it presents. We can simply dismiss any claim of poetical merit and treat it as a success in nonsense English as Hazlitt would have us believe. We can even look at its alignment with Coleridge’s theory of imagination, or the sexual implications it presents. But the poem is best described as a representation of Coleridge at work. Because there is evidence that his poetic genius is present throughout the poem, it is safe to say that he is at work and that the “Preface” only adds to how he is at work. Additionally, “*the claim made for ‘Kubla Khan’ was but one of a long series made by Coleridge concerning*

spontaneous composition” (Fruman 335). This was how he worked. Now whether we believe Coleridge’s account of the poem’s source or not, the “Preface” has become such an influential part of the experience that it can be considered a part of the poem. And a part of the poem we can say that he may have been under the influence of opium more than just sleep, yet he was still given that opportunity in the farmhouse to envision “Kubla Khan” and reward us with a highly engaging experience that is still searching for meaning.

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