

# *"Kubla Khan" Again: the Ocean, the Caverns, and the Ancestral Voices*

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A DEGREE of consensus about "Kubla Khan" seems to have emerged from the large amount of analysis devoted to it in recent years. If one examines, for instance, the comments of Irene H. Chayes, George Watson, and Patricia M. Adair, it soon becomes clear that although they differ in their interpretations of some individual details they all accept as a premise that the poem's images are in some way emblematic of the movement of the mind in the process of creative activity.<sup>1</sup> I am in sympathy with this general concept of what the poem means, and the comments which follow do not question it, although I know that many readers would. However, I do think that certain aspects of what appears now to be the prevailing interpretation are less than satisfactory. In particular, I want to raise some questions about the significance of the "lifeless ocean," a subject on which Chayes and Adair are substantially in agreement. And by doing this, I want also to show that the "Ancestral voices prophesying war" are capable of bearing an implication which is not countenanced by any analysis of the poem which I have read.

Both Chayes (p. 12) and Adair (p. 118) regard the underground sea into which the river finally falls as an image of the subconscious mind; the sacred river rises from this subterranean source and runs briefly above ground, just as in the process of artistic creation elements stored in the subconscious rise briefly to the consciousness and are given form in the successful work of art. This interpretation suggests that the place from which the foun-

tain rises and the place into which the river descends are essentially the same—the “ancient unconscious source of wisdom, the hiding-place of man’s power, which enriched and fertilised great civilisations and poetry in different countries at different times, wherever and whenever it rose to the surface” (Adair, p. 133). But if this is what Coleridge means by the underground sea, it is difficult to understand why he should so strongly associate it with sterility and death. When he first refers to it he describes it as “sunless,” which might simply be intended to stress that it is dark. But when he later calls it a “lifeless ocean” he reinforces another meaning suggested by the absence of sunlight. Chayes mentions the shift from “sunless” to “lifeless” (p. 12), but passes over it without remarking on the attendant emphasis on sterility, an emphasis which makes it difficult to agree with her that the sea is intended by Coleridge as an image of “the unconscious.” A kind of defeat, or death, is implied by the river’s descent into the “lifeless ocean.” The river is deprived of its vitality by the “caverns” through which it falls, and there is no indication in Coleridge’s phrase that it is returning to a source of power which will enrich and fertilize. I would suggest that the sense of negation which thus accompanies the river’s descent is likely to be an important aspect of whatever meaning the poem’s images are capable of bearing, and that it is not really accounted for by the assumption that the “lifeless ocean” and the fountain’s source are one and the same. The “lifeless ocean” seems clearly expressive of a sterility which is for some reason the destination of that initial upsurge embodied by the fountain. It is a destination which is in dramatic contrast to the violent life of the river’s source. And the contrast is not simply between a state of arousal and a state of quiescence, but between that which is alive and that which is dead. What this means, I think, is that there is a need to describe Coleridge’s “lifeless ocean” in some other terms than those which appear to have become prevalent.

In order to understand the meaning of the caverns and the underground sea, it is necessary to think of them in relation to the fountain. I cannot mention here the several complexities of meaning which have been associated with the fountain, complexities such as Chayes' distinction between the fountain as primary imagination and the river as secondary imagination (p. 10), but generally speaking, whenever "Kubla Khan" has been discussed as a poem about the creative process, the fountain has been associated with that spontaneous and passionately imaginative energy which Coleridge always felt to be the necessary and often, for him, elusive beginning of creative activity. From this powerful though violent source the river flows towards the caverns and its descent into the "lifeless" underground sea, falling, as it has risen, in "tumult." At a certain point along its course, a point where the two tumults are heard to mingle in a harmonious "measure," the pleasure-dome is built. Since the dome is clearly an image of the poem which, later in "Kubla Khan," Coleridge expresses a desire to create, its carefully specified location is likely to be very important to any interpretation which regards "Kubla Khan" as being about the creative process. The location which is appropriate to the pleasure-dome is like the dome itself in that it is one at which opposites are reconciled; the tumult of an outburst into life (the fountain) and the tumult of a descent into lifelessness (the caves) here merge into a kind of harmony. Whatever forces are represented by the fountain and the caves, it is clear that at this point along the river's course some kind of reconciliation between them is achieved. If "Kubla Khan" is a poem about the creative process, and if the fountain is emblematic of a particular kind of mental activity, the logic of the poem's images, as we have so far examined them, leads naturally towards the idea that the caverns are emblematic of another kind of activity which is different from, and perhaps even opposite to that represented by the fountain, yet which can nevertheless sometimes be brought into

harmony with it. It is as if the fountain and the caves represent extreme versions of two different activities which, when neither is exclusively or predominantly present, can combine to create order, or "measure."

The contrast between the fountain and the caves is a contrast between that which bursts into life and that which encloses and carries down towards death. It is between an extreme of energy and an extreme of containment which in the final "tumult" is in conflict with that energy. However, the sacred river does not reach the caverns immediately after thrusting out from below the surface—it progresses through a limited degree of containment of which the final devitalising enclosure by the caverns may be regarded as an extreme form. And it is at the mid-point between the fountain and the caves that the pleasure-dome is appropriately built. The river initially bursts to the surface in the form of a violent fountain, it then settles into a more steady course, contained within its restraining banks, but is eventually swallowed up by the caverns, through which it falls, protestingly but inevitably, into the sterile sea. At a certain point in its course, while it possesses the energy of its source without the chaos with which that energy was at first accompanied, and while it is contained within banks that control it without depriving it of life, a kind of harmony between energy and containment is achieved, and it is there that the pleasure-dome is constructed. It is not surprising that Coleridge's very precise definition of this point of balance has led a number of readers to think of his statement that poetry arises out of a reconciliation of opposite forces; the part of his statement which I think is most relevant here is his reference to the union of "judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement."<sup>2</sup> For it seems to me that the sequence of images in "Kubla Khan" makes it more than possible to connect the caverns with the idea of an extreme and devitalising containment, such as that which might occur when the rational "judgement"

asserts itself with excessive strength on a passionate, excited flow of images, and the lifeless ocean with the kind of uncreative sterility into which the mind might sink as a result of such containment.

An interpretation of this kind would imply that the image of the river flowing within its banks is emblematic of the movement of the mind when the flow of powerful "feeling" or "enthusiasm" is being held unassertively within bounds by the controlling "judgement." This image, of course, is hardly present in the poem at all. But if the general movement of the river is from an initial uncontrolled outpouring to a final enclosure beneath the earth's surface, then an intermediate stage of limited containment makes itself felt quite naturally. Moreover, the image which is implicit here is strongly hinted at elsewhere in Coleridge's writings. In his notebook he asks the question, "Does the sober Judgment previously measure out the banks between which the Stream of Enthusiasm shall rush with its torrent sound?" And he refers to "the *streamy* Nature of Association, which Thinking = Reason, curbs & rudders."<sup>3</sup> And in an essay about the nature of "Method" in philosophy and poetry, he describes an ideal "progress" of thought as if he were describing the movement of a river within its banks; the progress requires "a constant wakefulness of Mind, to keep it within the due limits of its course."<sup>4</sup>

I should perhaps make it clear at this point that I am not introducing these parallels in order to confirm an interpretation by means of external evidence. External evidence is not often capable of doing this in any case, and the parallels which I am giving in this analysis are not overwhelmingly close. But I do think that Coleridge tended to use certain kinds of image in certain kinds of context, and that to point out a few of these tendencies can be a way of making the interpretation I am offering look a little less unlikely than it otherwise might. For instance, as everyone knows, Coleridge worried constantly about the devitalization and the loss of spontaneity

which he knew could occur when the "intellect" asserted itself too strongly upon the "feelings," and once, in a letter to Thomas Wedgwood, he wrote that ". . . Feelings die by flowing into the mould of the Intellect."<sup>5</sup> And in another discussion of philosophical and poetic "Method" he uses the image of stagnant, enclosed water to describe the sterility to which the mind may come if that energy which is the source of all creative thought is held too firmly in check; he refers to "that life-ebullient stream which breaks through every momentary embankment, again, indeed, and evermore to embank itself, but within no banks to stagnate or be imprisoned."<sup>6</sup> Here, of course, he is in an optimistic mood, and he presents the final stagnation and imprisonment as only a hypothetical possibility. But elsewhere in his discussion of "Method" he regards it as a very real possibility, especially when "a mere dead arrangement, containing in itself no principle of progression," is substituted for a living and vigorous sequentiality.<sup>7</sup>

In his own case, Coleridge felt, this loss of spontaneity had been caused by an excessive devotion to philosophical and metaphysical enquiry. In "Dejection" he speaks of the "abstruse research" which stole from his own nature "all the natural man." And in a letter to Thomas Poole, looking back on a long period of illness "as a Storehouse of wild Dreams for Poems, or intellectual Facts for metaphysical Speculation," he hopes that "Philosophy & Poetry will not neutralize each other, & leave me an inert mass."<sup>8</sup> In order to describe this "metaphysical Speculation" which he feels may be an impediment to the creative impulse, Coleridge sometimes uses the imagery of caves and subterranean enclosures; at various points in his letters, he thanks God for having enabled him to find his way out of "that labyrinth-Den of Sophistry," he refers to the "dark unfathom'd Wells" into which he has probed "with metaphysic lancet" and out of which he is thankful to have come, and he locates the "Nymph Mathesis" in the "visionary caves of Abstracted Idea."<sup>9</sup> The kind of mental

activity which Coleridge is describing in these instances is rationalistic and analytical. He implies that this activity is capable of exploring great depths, just as in "Kubla Khan" he describes the caverns into which the river falls as "measureless." But he also implies, very strongly, that the penetration into these "unfathom'd Wells" and "visionary caves" of intellectual thought is devitalising in its effect upon his creative imagination. And in his use of these images he confronts, as I think he does in "Kubla Khan," a vision of the "lifeless" depths into which a purely ratiocinative activity of the mind may lead.

To regard the "lifeless ocean" as an image of this kind of sterility is a way of leading towards an interpretation of the "Ancestral voices prophesying war" which suggests that this phrase is more fully integrated into the poem's pattern of meaning than it has often been thought to be. Elisabeth Schneider feels that the phrase "remains unassimilated," that while it may have been intended as a "hint at something to come in the poem," it does not actually attain this function because the poem was not completed, and Coleridge's introduction of the image is one of the reasons why she cannot regard "Kubla Khan" as really "coherent."<sup>10</sup> Chayes regards the phrase as making a kind of sense, but the meaning which she attaches to it is drawn from sources outside the poem, and she does not connect that meaning with anything else in the poem itself (pp. 12-13). Her interpretation, therefore, would not satisfy Schneider that the image is really assimilated into the poem. Now I have suggested that it may be possible to regard the image of the river falling through the caverns as a metaphor that describes a spontaneous, energetic overflow being deprived of its life by an excess of containing ratiocination. If this is in any way an approximation to what the image means, then the moment of descent is a moment at which the river and the caverns are very much in opposition to each other. That, I suggest, is why the river falls "in tumult," as if protesting against what is being done to it. The relationship be-

tween river and cavern at this point is therefore one that involves a degree of struggle. And one must remember that it is precisely amid the tumult of the river's descent into the caverns that Kubla hears the "Ancestral voices." They come to him "from far," but their prophecy of war is in some way associated with the tumult of the river's descent. Whereas for most of the river's course the energy suggested by the fountain and the containing effect suggested by the caves are not in conflict, the caves finally become the enemy of the fountain. Thus, when either the spontaneous energy or the analytical intellect seeks to dominate its opposite it engages in a battle with it, and the result is "tumult." Certainly, "war" would not be an inappropriate word with which to describe a conflict of this kind.

I think that the progression of the poem's images tends irresistibly towards some such interpretation as this. But it may be valuable to go outside the poem just once more, to consider a comment which Coleridge once made on Shakespeare, who was for him the supreme instance of an artist in whose work spontaneous power and intellectual profundity were miraculously reconciled. At one point in the *Biographia* he suggests that in Shakespeare's early poems there is conflict rather than reconciliation; "In Shakespeare's *poems* the creative power and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace. Each in its excess of strength seems to threaten the extinction of the other. At length in the DRAMA they were reconciled."<sup>11</sup> Here, Coleridge turns to an image of warfare in order to describe a conflict between two contrasting forces which are very much like the two forces that I have suggested come eventually into conflict in "Kubla Khan." And after this image, he goes on to describe the two opposed elements as being like "two rapid streams" which fight against each other "within narrow and rocky banks." The imagery here is of course different from that of "Kubla Khan" because Shakespeare's "intellect" is itself described as a stream possessing an immense energy, just as is his



"creative power." But it seems to me that the juxtaposition of the image of warfare and the image of flowing water in a passage describing a conflict between "creative power" and "intellectual energy" is very suggestive of "Kubla Khan." And when Coleridge goes on to refer to the "tumult" which is caused by this conflict, the connection comes to seem even more persuasive.

In this passage, it is as if Shakespeare's early poetry acts as a warning about the kind of "tumult" which can occur when that initial energetic upsurge which leads to creative activity comes into conflict with the "intellectual," ratiocinative power of the mind, rather than finding a reconciliation with it. And Coleridge describes that conflict as a form of "war." In this way, the passage reinforces the possibility that the "war" which is prophesied in "Kubla Khan" has to do with a conflict between those two kinds of mental activity which are symbolized in the poem's images. Now if this is the kind of warfare that Coleridge is referring to, the voices which prophesy it would presumably be the voices of those who have a particular insight into the conflict that is being described. And who would be more aware of the nature of this conflict than those other creative artists, such as Shakespeare, who have preceded Coleridge? In the poem, of course, it is the ancestors of Kubla who prophesy war. But Kubla is a creative artist himself—he has built the pleasure-dome that becomes an image of the poem Coleridge longs to create, and it is a building which involves a miraculous union of opposite forces. What I am proposing, then, is that the "Ancestral voices" which he hears are the voices of the whole artistic and literary tradition which lies behind Coleridge, and that they prophesy the kind of "war" which the creative artist is particularly likely to encounter.

Although I have drawn attention to Coleridge's comments on Shakespeare's poetry, I don't think we need them in order to sense the possibility of the interpretation I have proposed. For if the poem is about certain relationships between "creative power" and the containing

"intellect," and if that relationship is at one point productive of conflict and "tumult," then it is surely not unnatural to relate the "war" that is mentioned to this conflict, and to feel that those who prophesy such warfare are likely to have a special insight into what causes it. I do not, therefore, regard the interpretation I have offered as being particularly far-fetched. Moreover, it is consistent with the idea that the whole poem is about the creative process, and it shows that the ancestral voices are less irreconcilable with the pattern of the poem's images than some readers have felt them to be.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Chayes, " 'Kubla Khan' and the Creative Process," *Studies in Romanticism*, VI (1966), 1-21; Watson, *Coleridge the Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 117-30; Adair, *The Waking Dream: A Study of Coleridge's Poetry* (London: Arnold, 1967), pp. 108-43.
- <sup>2</sup>*Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), II, 12.
- <sup>3</sup>*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Vol. II (London: Pantheon Books, 1962), 2553 17.111; *Notebooks*, Vol. I (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 1770 16.156.
- <sup>4</sup>*Treatise on Method as Published in the Encyclopaedia Metropolitana*, ed. Alice D. Snyder (London: Constable, 1934), p. 11.
- <sup>5</sup>*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), II, 914.
- <sup>6</sup>*The Friend*, in *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W.G.T. Shedd (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1868), II, 469.
- <sup>7</sup>*Complete Works*, II, 417.
- <sup>8</sup>*Letters*, II, 668-69.
- <sup>9</sup>*Letters*, II, 1037; I, 295; I, 7.
- <sup>10</sup>*Coleridge, Opium and "Kubla Khan"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 248.
- <sup>11</sup>*Biographia*, ed. Shawcross, II, 19.