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WARREN STEVENSON

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CRITICISM OF "KUBLA KHAN" HAS COME OF AGE ONLY DURING THE past decade or so. This is owing partly to the poem's inner compactness and subtlety, and partly to the bizarre circumstances which, according to Coleridge's prefatory note published with the poem in 1816, surrounded the poem's composition. Too long to be quoted in its entirety, the prefatory note is in the form of an apology in which the poet says he has been prevailed upon to publish the "fragment," and has done so "rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits." The defensive tone has to do with Coleridge's constitutional diffidence where his own best poetry was concerned, rather than with objective self-criticism. As such, it may be largely discounted.

The note goes on to ascribe composition of the poem to the summer of 1797 in "a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire," where the author had retired on account of ill health, and where he fell asleep from the effects of an "anodyne," while reading the account in Purchas his Pilgrimage of the construction of a palace and surrounding gardens by Kubla Khan, the Mongol ruler of thirteenth-century China. There followed "a profound sleep, at least of the external senses," lasting about three hours, during which the poet "has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines." Upon awakening he wrote down the fifty-four lines we have, whereupon he was interrupted by a "person on business from Porlock," with the result that he was never able to remember the rest of the poem.

For over a century this account of the poem's genesis was taken at face value, and readers who should have known better were lulled—one might almost say "conned"—into regarding it as a beautiful but meaningless fragment, thus incidentally discovering a new literary genre. Here matters stood when Lowes wrote The Road to Xanadu (1927), in the latter part of which he applied to "Kubla Khan" the same techniques of source-hunting that had been so brilliantly successful with "The Ancient Mariner" in the first part. On the premise that "The Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" are "built of essentially the same materials," Lowes extended our knowledge of the poem's sources. But
like his predecessors, Lowes accepted Coleridge's prefatory note uncritically, and lamely concluded that "Kubla Khan" is an aimless pageant.1

The first book successfully to broach the poem's inner meaning was Maud Bodkin's Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (London, 1934), with a Jungian reading which recognized that the poem is structured upon the archetypes of heaven and hell. Next came Knight's The Starlit Dome, which proposed a symbolic reading of the poem involving Freudian elements in the description of the landscape. According to Knight, the sacred river, which "runs into an infinity of death," is "a symbol of life." "As for Kubla Khan himself . . . he becomes God: or at least one of those 'huge and mighty forms' . . . in Wordsworth. . . . Compare the two levels of meaning in The Tempest, where Prospero performs a somewhat similar role . . . or Yeats's emperor in Byzantium." Knight also usefully observes that "The dome's shadow falls half-way along the river . . . [The dome] is directly associated with the 'mingled measure' of the sounds coming from the two extremes. . . . The 'mingled measure' suggests the blend and marriage of fundamental opposites: life and death, or creation and destruction. These 'mingle' under the shadow of the greater harmony of the crowning dome-circle." Knight concludes: "The poem has a barbaric and oriental magnificence that asserts itself with a happy power and authenticity too often absent from visionary poems set within the Christian tradition." 2 The poem's relation to the Christian tradition is a matter to which I shall return. Meanwhile, one may safely observe that, in common with "The Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel," "Kubla Khan" has its setting, for the most part, in the later Middle Ages.

Scholarship was not long in catching up with and vindicating criticism. The discovery in 1934 of the Crewe MS of the poem in Coleridge's handwriting, with its minor but significant variations from the published version and its independent account of how the poem came to be written, freed criticism once and for all from the incubus of Coleridge's 1816 piece of prefatory exotica, which, we are now beginning to realize, is best regarded as an imaginative adjunct to the poem,3 like the prose glossary added to "The Ancient Mariner" in Sibylline Leaves, or Shelley's preface to "Epipsychidion." The Crewe note, which follows

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rather than precedes the text of the poem, reads much more like a sober, factual account of the poem’s genesis:

This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock & Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year 1797. s. t. coleridge.4

Elisabeth Schneider, working with this and other evidence relating to the effects of opium, has established beyond serious doubt that Coleridge did not compose the poem in an opium dream: “Very likely Coleridge was in a sort of ‘Reverie’ as his holograph note says, and no doubt he had been taking opium. Perhaps too the euphoric effect of opium rendered his process of composition more nearly effortless than usual.”5

One recalls that the second part of “Christabel” was begun the morning after Coleridge had consumed a considerable quantity of wine.

Returning now to the problem of the poem’s “meaning”: criticism during the past two decades has consisted largely of refinement and elaboration of the symbolical exegesis of Bodkin and Knight, with some disagreement as to the role of the Khan, the nature of the poem’s “unity” (though on this point there is more agreement than disagreement), and the tone (hence, the meaning) of certain passages, most notably the conclusion.

In 1951 appeared an influential article by R. H. Fogle entitled “The Romantic Unity of ‘Kubla Khan.’” Continuing where Knight left off, Fogle sees the poem as embodying a Coleridgean “reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” accomplished by the Imagination. According to Fogle, the pleasure-dome is the focal point of the physical setting and is correspondingly important. Within the bounds of the encircled garden, the pleasure-dome and the river are the opposites to be reconciled. . . . The image of the dome suggests agreeable sensations of roundness and smoothness; the creation of Man, its quasi-geometrical shape is simpler than the forms of Nature which surround it, yet blends with them. This dome, however, also evokes the religious—it is in some sort a temple, if only to the mere mortal Kubla Khan. And thus there is also a blending or interfusion with its opposite, the sacred river Alph.

The pleasure-dome . . . is above and beyond Nature, a ‘miracle of rare device’ in which Man transcends and circumvents mere natural processes. It stands amid an enormous garden in which a considerable segment of wild nature is isolated and imprisoned for the delight of Kubla.6

5 “The Dream of ‘Kubla Khan,’” PMLA, 60 (1945), 796.
I have quoted Fogle at length because his remarks are a salutary corrective to the view sometimes expressed, that Kubla is a typical eighteenth-century man of reason, trying to impose his rational order upon a recalcitrant landscape. About all that needs to be said of this view is that if Kubla’s aim was to impose a rational order upon nature, and to wall out all the intractable and irrational elements, he has neither chosen nor built very well. Rather, the poem emphasizes the fusion of opposites within both the natural and human orders, and the landscape of the pleasure-garden is wholly Romantic in conception:

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.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

Most critics have recognized that the poem is about the nature of poetic composition; a few have recognized that it is also about the nature of divine creativity. What remains to be accomplished is a synthesizing of these two views that will correspond to the synthesis of the poem itself. According to Humphrey House, whose view agrees in essence with those of Knight and Fogle, Xanadu is a symbol of harmonious human activity. The sacred river is “the sacred given condition of human life. By using it rightly, by building on its bank, by diverting its water into sinuous rills, Kubla achieves his perfect state of balanced living. . . . It is an imaginative statement of the abundant life in the universe, which begins and ends in a mystery touched with dread, but it is a statement of this life as the ground of ideal human activity.” Since “perfect state” presumably means just that, House is in effect saying that Kubla Khan in the poem inhabits a real paradise, one in which the conjunction of heaven and earth is realized. As House also remarks, “this is a vision of the ideal human life as the poetic imagination can create it.” Hence, we should not be surprised to find that in the creation of this paradise the “whole man” is taken into account. The landscape is bathed in the light of eternity, and the poet explicitly tells us that the sacred river is flung up “at once and ever.”

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In the first thirty-six lines of the poem, all the opposites of human and divine nature are given free scope and are reconciled into a unity which is aptly symbolized by the climactic vision of the "sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!" Among the opposites which are reconciled are the infinite and the finite ("caverns measureless to man" and "twice five miles"); darkness and light ("sunless sea" and "sunny spots of greenery"); nature untamed and nature improved ("forests" and "gardens"); savagery and sanctity ("a savage place! as holy and enchanted . . ."); destruction and fertility ("Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail/ Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail"); life and death ("Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,/ Then . . . sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean"). Energies which elsewhere, after the Fall, would appear as dangerous and demonic are here harmoniously integrated into the total design. In short, these lines give us Coleridge's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in which, as in Blake's "The Tyger," we confront the mystery of creation.

It has been frequently observed that Coleridge's description of the landscape in Xanadu borrows from Milton's account of the garden of Eden in Paradise Lost (IV. 132–285; IX passim). So far as I know, only one critic has made the further comparison of the opening lines of "Kubla Khan" to the first two chapters of Genesis. H. H. Meier writes, "if the Miltonic parallel holds, Kubla himself is God the ordainer of the garden, whereas other persons there are strictly speaking none."9 The Edenic hypothesis, or parallel, works insofar as it helps to account for the sense of pristine enchantment which imbues this landscape. Also, one notes that in decreeing that the pleasure-dome and its surrounding gardens be built, Kubla Khan is like God creating the world by fiat. The river which emerges from the deep romantic chasm is thrice referred to in the poem, and always as "the sacred river." It presumably returns to the fountain via the sunless sea,10 like a serpent with its tail in its mouth—the ancient emblem of eternity. Its very name, Alph, speaks of the beginning of things.

There are, it is true, "forests ancient as the hills;/ Enfolding sunny spots of greenery," but the stock phrase, "ancient as the hills," has the connotation of timelessness rather than of specific age. It does, however, serve to anticipate the reference to "Ancestral voices prophesying war,"

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10 See Richard Gerber, "Keys to 'Kubla Khan,'" English Studies, 44 (1963), 334–335, where this point is discussed at length.
which some critics have complained of as detracting from the poem’s unity. Now if we follow the “Edenic hypothesis” through to its logical conclusion, we shall see that the war here prophesied is not only war on earth, but (since Eden symbolizes the conjunction of heaven and earth) also war in heaven.\textsuperscript{11} The “ancestral voices” are prophesying a falling away from the pristine unity in which heaven and earth are one, as in the myth of Blake. “Ancestral voices prophesying war” thus becomes parallel to the line “And when the stars threw down their spears” in “The Tyger,” the main difference being that the former is anticipatory, the latter retrospective. The unity of Kubla’s paradise cannot last for the same reason that the unity of God’s paradise, which it symbolizes, could not remain unbroken.

There remains the task of answering those critics who have attempted a negative interpretation of these thirty-six lines—which constitute the main body of the poem—as describing a false paradise. By rights the burden of proof should be on them, since the eulogistic tone of these lines seems almost self-evident. Reference has been made to the fact that the “sacred river” is always thus described. “But oh!” which introduces the second stanza seems sufficiently clear in its emotional connotation of wonder and delight, followed as it is by “that deep romantic chasm” and “holy and enchanted.” And finally, the last two lines of this part of the poem sum up what has preceded, not only, as we have seen, symbolically, but also with what amounts to an explicit statement of approbation, paralleling the formula in Genesis, “and God saw that it was good”:

It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

In other words, if we accept the pleasure-dome as a unifying symbol of the whole \textit{hortus clausus} of which it is the focal point (and notice how the reference to “caves of ice” here and in line 47 invites such a reading), then the tone and attitude of these summarizing lines apply equally to everything that has preceded them. To quote House again: “There is only one answer to those who want to make this a false paradise—that is, an appeal to the poem as a whole, its rhythmical development, its total effect as a poem of fulfilment, and to say, ‘If you still want to make that experience a spurious experience, do so: ‘Thy way thou canst not miss, me mine requires.’”\textsuperscript{12} Marshall Suther, after a close examination of the poem’s imagery in relation to the imagery of Coleridge’s other poems, comes to a similar conclusion: “The fact seems

\textsuperscript{11} See Meier, p. 22.  
\textsuperscript{12} House, p. 120.
to be that none of the efforts to read an adverse meaning into the first part of the poem stand up in the face of an examination of Coleridge’s other uses of the images found there, or even simply in the face of most readers’ spontaneous reaction to the lines.”

Representative of the poem’s anti-Edenic critics at their most articulate is J. B. Beer, whose book *Coleridge the Visionary*, in many ways the best study to date of Coleridge’s “great three” poems, devotes over eighty pages to “Kubla Khan.” Beer sees his own interpretation of the poem as a logical development and extension of House’s; but this is misleading, if not disingenuous; for whereas House, as we have seen, regards the first thirty-six lines of the poem as describing a true paradise, Beer regards them as describing a false paradise.

After noting that according to Porphyry as interpreted by Thomas Taylor, a cavern is a symbol of the material world, Beer somewhat hastily and illogically concludes that “Alph is the sacred river, as it flows after the Fall.” But the river Alph flows into, not out of, the caverns; and if, as in the myth of Blake, the caverns symbolize the fallen or about-to-be-fallen world, the bright gardens above may well symbolize the unfallen one. As we have seen, the only overt reference to anything that looks like the Fall, in this part of the poem, is in lines 29–30, containing the reference to “Ancestral voices prophesying war.” The voices proceed from the tumult of the sacred river plunging into the lifeless ocean amid the caverns, so that what is being prophesied may well be the Fall and the creation of the material world, of which both the sunless sea and the caverns are Neoplatonic symbols, as the result of war in heaven and its dislocations.

Beer also goes astray when he attempts to argue, from sources extraneous to the poem, that “Kubla Khan is the Tartar king of tradition: fierce and cruel, he bears the brand of Cain.” None of this is in the poem. Beer continues: “The man-made dome is a mistaken ideal, an attempt to escape from the true temple and create a private world. . . . It is the flaw in Kubla Khan’s personality that he cannot possess this innocent attitude to nature [of Coleridge’s much later poem, ‘To Nature’]. Instead, he must enclose his paradise with walls and towers and build a private pleasure-dome in the middle of it.” The pleasure-dome, according to Beer, “emphasizes the theme of enclosure and separation from the world which was introduced by the building of the walls and towers.”

15 Ibid., p. 211.
16 Ibid., pp. 222, 224.
tradicts this interpretation. Also, it is worth remembering that both Eden and heaven itself were “walled” in Milton’s account. Nor does Beer satisfactorily explain why the poet should wish to emulate Kubla’s achievement. In fact, Beer’s “Tartar king of tradition: fierce and cruel” and the Kubla Khan of the poem have little in common besides the name. Even the historical Kubla Khan, who was a patron of the arts and a ruler of intelligence and magnanimity,\textsuperscript{17} sorts somewhat oddly with this description. Coleridge, whose two notebook references to the Khan are eulogistic rather than pejorative in tone, records that “Kubla-khan [sic] ordered letters to be invented for his people,”\textsuperscript{218} and it was evidently this human, civilizing aspect of the Khan which most interested him.

Beer goes on to compare stanza two, describing the romantic chasm and the mighty fountain, with Milton’s description of Eden just before the Fall in Book IX of Paradise Lost—a fair enough comparison, insofar as both scenes are invested with “a sense of foreboding.”\textsuperscript{19} But again, the tone is almost entirely eulogistic, and House’s comment on the “ancestral voices” may be applied retrospectively to the whole stanza: “This is essential to the full unity of the conception: the Paradise contains knowledge of the threat of its own destruction.”\textsuperscript{20} The woman wailing for her demon-lover recalls the lines in Genesis (VI) about the sons of God loving the daughters of men which intrigued Byron while he was writing Manfred. They also recall, as several critics have observed, the wailing women associated with the cults of Adonis, Osiris, Thammuz, and Attis.\textsuperscript{21} But the wailing woman and her demon-lover are introduced into the poem only by way of comparison and do not actually inhabit the “holy and enchanted” chasm itself.

Beer is at some pains to deny that Coleridge’s “mighty fountain” corresponds to the fountain in the paradise-garden of Paradise Lost. Yet both scenes are “savage,” and both fountains erupt to water their respective gardens and find their way back down to the “nether flood.” True, Coleridge’s fountain is potentially destructive as well as life-giving—but only potentially. The word “dancing” in the phrase “dancing rocks” well epitomizes the essentially harmonious nature of the vision.

\textsuperscript{18} Notebooks, I, 1281, 8.30. Coleridge seems to be confusing Kubla with Genghis Khan, who according to Purchas received the alphabet from Nestorian Christians. The other entry reads, “Cublai Chan began to reign, 1256 the greatest Prince in Peoples, Cities, & Kingdoms that ever was in the World” (ibid., I, 1840, 16.223).
\textsuperscript{19} Beer, p. 234.
\textsuperscript{20} House, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{21} Gerber, pp. 327–329, makes much of the sound link between Kubla and Cybele. See also Beer, p. 235, and Meier, pp. 28–29.
"Kubla Khan" as Symbol

It is a romantic vision of Paradise hovering on the brink of the Fall, but still delighting in its inner harmony and successful maintenance of what in the fallen world would be a well-nigh intolerable tension.

Faced with the unmistakably eulogistic tone of lines 31–36 describing the shadow of the dome floating on the water, Beer resorts to a rather desperate strategem in order to reconcile this passage with his previous interpretation. "The 'caves of ice' are the new, transforming element in the poem. The dome of pleasure is not the pleasure-dome which Kubla decreed... It is the "miracle" in which two seemingly irreconcilable principles are held together: heat and ice."22 Here, Beer at least belatedly recognizes the principle of the reconciliation of opposites at work in the poem, and the function of the dome as a symbol of unity and integration. But to say that "the dome of pleasure" (of line 31) is not the pleasure-dome which Kubla decreed (line 2), when the very phrase, "It was a pleasure-dome," occurs in line 36, and when these lines so clearly summarize everything that has gone before, is tantamount to not being able to see the dome for the caves.

To do justice to Beer's account of the poem, I must quote his own summary:

*Kubla Khan,* to sum up, is a poem with two major themes: genius and the lost paradise. In the first stanza [ll. 1–11] the man of commanding genius, the fallen but daemonic man, strives to rebuild the lost paradise in a world which is, like himself, fallen. In the second stanza [ll. 12–30], the other side of the daemonic reasserts itself: the mighty fountain in the savage place, the wailing woman beneath the waning moon, the demon-lover. The third stanza [ll. 31–36] is a moment of miraculous harmony between the contending forces: the sunny dome and the caves of ice, the fountain and the caves, the dome and the waves all being counter-poised in one harmony. Finally, in the last stanza [ll. 37–54], there is a vision of paradise regained...23

The stanzaic divisions, which I have supplied, are Beer's own. But the Crewe MS, with only one stanzaic division (after line 36), does not lend support to this interpretation. Moreover, any interpretation, to be convincing, must take into account that in the Crewe MS the first thirty-six lines are presented as a unity. Indeed, there are signs that Beer himself is not entirely happy with his interpretation: "In spite of the over-riding pattern of the poem, however, the imagery is so complicated and inter-woven that a complete interpretation cannot be presented in one straightforward exposition. Instead, one is forced to es-

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22 Beer, p. 246.
23 Ibid., pp. 266–267. Beer's interpretation is substantially followed by Geoffrey Yarllott, Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid (London, 1967), Ch. V.
tablish the dialectic of thesis, antithesis, static harmony and desired consummation."  

More relevant are Beer's remarks, in the form of an addendum to his main interpretation, about King Solomon, who "built a pleasure-house for himself and a paradise-garden," and whose beloved bride, the Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia, becomes the Wisdom of the Apocryphal writings. Beer also observes that in the Book of Ecclesiasticus Wisdom compares herself to the trees and waters of a paradise-garden. Thus viewed, the Abyssinian maid, like Solomon's beloved, becomes "the image of a psychological state—the recovery of the lost Shechinah." But to this one must hasten to add that it is a state which is symbolized in the description of the hortus clausus in the first part of the poem.

More convincing than Beer's dichotomy, but in accord with his addendum, is the reading of the poem by Dorothy F. Mercer, according to which Kubla's "deem" is identified with the Logos, and the Abyssinian maid is identified with Boehme's Sophia, the heavenly virgin who "is from Eternity" and exists within the Godhead. Miss Mercer compares Kubla Khan's pleasure-dome to Boehme's "pleasant Palace of Joy . . . made out of the Midst of the Waters," an image of heaven; the "sunless sea" and "lifeless ocean" to Boehme's "material Water [which] is as it were dead or has Death in it . . . and God called it a sea." In other words, the pleasure-dome is an image of God's heavenly creation, and the sunless sea is an image of the primordial matter which has not yet been given form. The mighty fountain is the well-spring of divine creativity initiating a dance of opposites. With reference to the lines beginning "And from this chasm with ceaseless turmoil seething," Miss Mercer writes: "Here in the tremendous activity of the fourth form, the great mystery of the abyss of God, is the potentiality of the determinate, of both good and evil, wrath and love, savagery and tranquillity. . . . The nature of the moral miracle embodied in Kubla Khan is [that] . . . the garden of Eden was such so long as the tree of knowledge of good and evil had not been tasted; it was a garden so long as innocence knew nothing of morality." In this poem, "Cole-ridge is viewing life's process sub specie aeternitatis, from the point of view of the creative artist; so viewed the savage place is as holy and enchanted as the Abyssinian maid singing of Mount Abora." The poem is an effort to communicate and thus to evoke the "paradisal con-

25 Ibid., pp. 269–270.
27 *Aurora*, II, 50–51; *Three Principles*, VI, 15; quoted in Mercer, p. 53.
sciousness” and so to recommend “the adoration of the creative process itself.”

Miss Mercer’s Boehmenistic reading is successful insofar as it combines a critical awareness of the poem’s archetypes with a “holistic” approach to its opposites, and a nearly equal emphasis upon the roles of creation and “re-creation” in the poem’s structure. In a sense, Coleridge is working out a magnificent variation on the Neoplatonic theme that the artist most nearly resembles God in the act of artistic creation. In the first part of the poem we see Kubla, like Poe’s Landscape Gardener, creating through the word, by fiat, building a pleasure-dome amid a beautiful oriental garden poised over a “sunless sea.” It is a symbol of God’s heavenly creation. “A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice,” it images both the “gardens bright with sinuous rills” and the subterranean “caverns measureless to man,” and is imaged by them.

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves.

This about-to-be-created world in the time-stream of history “mirrors” or reflects the transcendent heavenly reality. The lines also recall the spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters, from Genesis, hence the act of creation. Boehme speaks of God as “the great Source, or Fountain,” and Coleridge wrote in his notebook in 1796, “Well-spring—total God.” The fountain, then, symbolizes the fountain of eternal life, which Plotinus also used as an image of God. From the fountain-source flows the sacred river through the Edenic garden, both of which are still in a harmonious relationship to the dome. None of the attempts to persuade us of a disjunctive relationship is convincing, if only because the sacred river waters the garden, and both provide an appropriate setting for the pleasure-dome. The sacred river, if we are to trust Coleridge’s marginal note to Boehme, corroborated by an entry in William Holwell’s Mythological Dictionary, symbolizes divine Truth. Beside Boehme’s note, “water (with the other Elements) is the Mother of Earth, or else it would be dead or barren,” Coleridge wrote, “Truth is Water called the Mother of Earth.” Under the heading “Alphi” Holwell has, “An Oracle was so termed by the Amonians: and Alpha, the voice of God.” Thus, both the dome and its shadow, as well as

28 Mercer, pp. 54–59.
the fountain and the river, are symbolic, showing "the translucence of
the eternal through and in the temporal."31

If the sacred river is symbolic of divine Truth, it is not unreasonable
to ask what the divine Truth is that is being symbolized. There are
various hints in the poem that a tradition of visionary knowledge,
partially lost or obscured, is being referred to. Among these hints are
the sacred river, Mount Abora, and the Abyssinian maid, as well as the
incantatory sound of names like Kubla Khan and Xanadu. The
pleasure-dome itself may be such a hint if, as seems likely, it symbolizes
the original conjunction of knowledge and pleasure before the Fall.
Ahania has a similar role in Blake's myth; and there is also Enithar-
mon's apocalyptic "crystal house" wherein her sons and daughters
engage in "the sports of night" (Europe, 13:12-14). "My heart ser-
aglios an whole host of Joys," Coleridge wrote in his notebook in 1796,32
but his unified sensibility seems to have scandalized some of his critics.
One is again reminded of the Song of Solomon, with its mingling of
sensual and apocalyptic elements.

What seems to be required, then, is a mythic hypothesis, or literary
sources, or both, which will account for this particular configuration of
symbols and images. If one were to guess, on the basis of the interpreta-
tion whose outline has been thus far traced, one would probably conjec-
ture that in addition to the Neoplatonic tradition, the poem also makes
use of another, older tradition associated with such matters as sun-
worship and something roughly corresponding to Blake's visionary
Christianity, but in a primitive, hence mythic, form.

Owing to the widespread fable of Prester John and the accounts of
returned travellers, both Tartary and Abyssinia were reported at differ-
ent times to have had Christian leaders.33 This in turn opened up the
possibility of finding a tradition of Christianity being preserved more or
less intact, free from the corruptions of the Western church. Mungu
Khan, Kubla's brother, and many of his courtiers were baptized Chris-
tians, and Naiam, Kubla's uncle, whom he finally defeated in battle,
had been secretly baptized. Kubla himself, upon putting down Naiam's
insurrection, called all the Christians among his uncle's followers to him,
kissed the New Testament, "and caused his Barons to do the like." He
also observed Christmas and Easter, as well as the chief feasts of the
Saracens, Jews, and Idolaters: "The cause (he said) was because of
those foure Prophets to which all the world doth reverence: Jesus of the
Christians, Mahomet of the Saracens, Moses of the Jews, and Sogo-

32 Notebooks, I, 135, G.130.
manhas Can the first Idoll of the Pagans. . . Yet he had best opinion of the Christian faith because it contained nothing but goodnesse.”

Of the religion of the Tartars, Purchas reports that “they believe in one God, the Maker of all things visible and invisible, the Author of good things and punishments, yet do they not worship him with prayers, or any certain rites.” This is something which undoubtedly would have interested Coleridge the Unitarian in the 1790's. Purchas' account continues, “They worship the Sunne, Lights, and Fire; Water also, and the Earth. . . They have no set rites prescribed by Law.” (Around the time when he wrote “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge had planned to write Hymns to the Sun and Moon.) “They are given to Divinations, Auguries, Soothsayings, Witchcrafts, Inchantments: and when they receive answere from the Devill, they attribute the same unto God. . .” Here again is the suggestion of a “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” which seems particularly relevant to the “woman wailing for her demon-lover.”

Three pages later in Purchas his Pilgrimage come the lines Coleridge was reading just before he composed “Kubla Khan”:

In Xamdu did Cublicn Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddows, pleasant springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the middest thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be removed from place to place. . . .

This was Kubla's summer palace. He also had a winter palace, “the greatest that was ever seene,” in Cambalu, likewise surrounded by walls and gardens, and Purchas reports that “Hee for a superstitious feare suggested by his Astrologers, of a rebellion which sometime should be raised against him in Cambalu, built a new Citie near thereunto called Taidu.” This story, which is repeated in Purchas his Pilgrimes, doubtless helps to account for the “ancestral voices prophesying war” in the poem.

In addition to the appeal of some of their unorthodox religious views, the Tartars exerted another subtle claim on the sympathetic attention of Coleridge. I refer to their possession of those qualities of warlike bravery and decisiveness in which Coleridge seems to have regarded himself as being deficient, and for which he retained a certain childlike admiration. One thinks of his undergraduate escapade of running away

35 Ibid., p. 469.
36 Ibid., pp. 472–475.
to join the dragoons. Compare the following note: “Every thing, that has been known or deemed fit to win woman’s Love, I have an impulse to make myself—even tho’ I should otherwise look down upon it—I cannot endure not to be strong in arms, a dazzling Soldier. . . .”37 Shades of “The British Stripling’s War Song,” which Coleridge wrote in 1799! As for the decisiveness of the Tartars, the following anecdote speaks for itself. Marco Polo reports, says Purchas, “That in Cambalau was such sudden and rigorous execution of Justice, that one taking a jarre of Milke from a woman’s head, and beginning to drinke, upon the woman’s out-cry was apprehended, and presently with a sword cut in sunder, that the bloude and milk issued together.”38 In “Kubla Khan” the warlike bravery has been channeled into the arts of peace, but the decisiveness remains a potent factor, conveyed by the deliberate sounds of the alliteration:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree.

If the Tartars represented to Coleridge’s imagination a primitive breadth of religious view and freedom from petty moralistic compunctions, the quotidian lack of such freedom might help to explain his failure to sustain his writing at this imaginative level. Certainly, the moralizing tendentiousness of Coleridge’s inferior verse is nowhere evident in “Kubla Khan.”

Turning now to Bruce’s Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, a book whose influence on the poem was first noted by Lowes, we find the Ethiopians, or “Cushites” as Bruce calls them, related to a tradition of occult learning. Bruce says it seems “probable” that the first alphabet was Ethiopic, and conjectures that God told Moses on Mount Sinai to use not Egyptian hieroglyphics, but the letters representing sounds which “the Ishmaelites, Cushites, and Indian trading nations had long been using.” As we have seen, Coleridge credited Kubla Khan with having introduced letters to his people. Bruce also conjectures that the Queen of Sheba “was an Ethiopian, or Cushite shepherd” and “a person of learning.” Upon her bearing Solomon a son, “All Abyssinia was thereupon converted,”39 first to Judaism, and later to Christianity.

The source of the Abyssinian maid would seem to be a hitherto neglected passage in Bruce’s Travels describing a Mohammedan wedding he attended at Arkeeko, near the island of Masuah, “in the very entrance to Abyssinia”:

37 Notebooks, II, 3148, f. 42.
38 Purchas his Pilgrimage, p. 463.
"Kubla Khan" as Symbol

I heard two girls, professors hired for such occasions, sing alternately verse for verse in reply to each other, in the most agreeable and melodious manner I ever heard in my life. This gave me great hopes that, in Abyssinia, I should find music in a state of perfection little expected in Europe. Upon inquiry into particulars I was miserably disappointed, by being told these musicians were all strangers from Azab, the myrrh country, where all the people were natural musicians, and sung in a better stile than I had heard; but that nothing of this kind was known in Abyssinia, a mountainous, barbarous country, without instrument, and without song; and that it was the same here in Atbara; a miserable truth, which I afterwards completely verified. These singers were Cushites, not Shepherds.

I, however, made myself master of two or three of these alternate songs upon the guitar, the wretched instrument of that country; and was surprised to find the words in a language equally strange to Masuah and Abyssinia. I had frequent interviews with these musicians in the evening; they were perfectly black and woolly-headed. Being slaves, they spoke both Arabic and Tigré, but could sing in neither . . . I have sometimes endeavoured to recover fragments of these songs, which I once perfectly knew from memory only, but unfortunately I committed none of them to writing. Sorrow, and various misfortunes, that every day marked my stay in the barbarous country to which I was then going, and the necessary part I, much against my will, was for self-preservation forced to take in the ruder occupations of those times, have, to my great regret, obliterated long ago the whole from my memory.40

Here is the experience of the poet in "Kubla Khan" stripped down to its bare essentials: the girl, or girls, who thought evidently not from Abyssinia were Cushites or Ethiopians, hence "Abyssinian," singing beautifully to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument; and the fascinated auditor's vain attempts to revive within him their melody. But Coleridge has apprehended his materials symbolically and so has transformed them. The Abyssinian maid becomes at once Coleridge's muse, Boehme's Sophia or celestial Wisdom, the soror mystica of the alchemists,41 and the equivalent in the poem's nascent mythology to Blake's Enitharmon, whose reunion with Los marks the crucial stage of his struggle towards cosmic redemption. She also, as several critics have noted, merges with the Isis figure who is elsewhere present in the poem's background. In particular Coleridge seems to have been influenced by the frontispiece to Maurice's History of Hindostan, portraying "the Isis Omnia of Egypt, the Indian Isa, and Grecian Ceres," a giant female figure with one foot on the water and the other on a wooded hill,

40 Ibid., III, 51–52.
Frontispiece to Maurice's *History of Hindostan*
"Kubla Khan" as Symbol

The Mundane Egg of Heliopolis, adorned with the Lunar Crescent.

The great Golden Bull, adored at Meaco, in Japan, in the attitude of buttting with his horn against the Egg of Chaos.

To his Grace the Duke of Marlborough as a connoisseur of Oriental Mythology this Plate is respectfully inscribed by L. H.

"The mundane egg of Heliopolis" from Maurice's History of Hindostan
holding in her right hand a stringed instrument and in her left a bucket, doubtless to demonstrate her control over the tides. Her dress is bespangled with stars, and over her head is a crescent moon.

Maurice sets out to prove that the earliest inhabitants of Hindostan "were of celestial, not terrestrial origin; that their empire was the empire of the imagination in the skies, not of real power on this globe of the earth." He adds that the ancient sovereigns of Hindostan were "children of the sun and moon." All this is relevant to "Kubla Khan," particularly as Bryant observes that from the earliest inhabitants of this region were descended the Ethiopians. He quotes Nilus the Egyptian to the effect that "The Indi are the wisest of all mankind. The Ethiopians are a colony from them and inherit the wisdom of their forefathers."

Maurice's account of Hindu cosmogony, which he sets out to reconcile with Genesis, contains a feature which helps to account for the prominent role of the pleasure-dome in "Kubla Khan." Maurice observes that "Of the various systems of cosmogony, according to the Hindoo writers, scarcely any one has been hitherto exhibited to the public . . . which does not mention the importance of the egg in the production of creation." Plate II of Maurice's first volume illustrates "The mundane egg of Heliopolis adorned with a lunar crescent" and "the Agathodaimon, or Good Genius symbolized by a Serpent circling in its genial embrace the Mundane Egg." The image of the "mundane egg" (which is also found in Bryant) seems to have left its mark on both Blake's symbolism and "Kubla Khan."

According to one Sanskrit account as narrated by Maurice, the Almighty "formed a hollow sphere of gold, composed of two parts, to which he imparted a ray of his own light, and it became the sun." In another account Monu, son of Brahma, informs his inquirers that this world was all darkness undistinguishable, altogether as in a profound sleep, till the self-existent invisible God, making it manifest with his five elements, and other glorious forms, perfectly dispelled the gloom. Desiring to raise up creatures by an emanation from his own essence, he first created the waters, and impressed them with the power of motion: by that power was produced a golden egg, blazing like a thousand stars, in which was born Brahma, the great parent of all rational beings, that which is, the invisible cause, self-existing but unperceived! That divinity having dwelt in the egg through revolving years, himself meditating upon himself, divided into two equal parts; and from these

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44 Maurice, p. 59.
halves he formed the heavens and earth, placing in the midst the subtil aether, the eight points of the world, and the permanent receptacle of waters.

According to yet another Sanskrit treatise, the “independent Spirit, whose essence is eternal, sole, and self-existent,” first gave birth to “a light, most perceptible to the elementary sense, but extracted from the all-comprehensive essence of his own perfection.” The Deity then caused to emanate from himself “an immeasurable torrent of water,” and he preserved it suspended by his almighty power. “By the same prolific energy, eggs without number, bearing the shape of primordial matter, were generated, and floated upon that mighty abyss.” Finally, Maurice quotes Sir W. Jones to the effect that “in the great reservoir, or cistern, of Catmandu, the capital of Nepaul, there is placed, in a recumbent posture, a large well-proportioned image of blue marble, representing Nayen [the spirit of Brahma], floating on the waters.”

When these passages are placed beside Maurice’s later (p. 107) account of the ice-bubble, which Coleridge found impressive enough to record in his notebook, and of which E. H. Coleridge conjectured that it influenced Coleridge’s description of the “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!” it can be seen that we are dealing with a potent configuration of images, and one which doubtless helped to shape Coleridge’s vision of creation as it manifests itself in “Kubla Khan.” Merging these images of floating eggs, sleeping gods, and ice-bubbles with a previously quoted passage from Boehme concerning a palace of Joy built upon the waters, Coleridge evidently hit upon the image of a pleasure-dome glittering in the sun and casting its shadow on the sacred river as a symbol of unity and perfection, imaging the unity and perfection of God, who in Sanskrit sources is said to be “like a perfect sphere, without beginning or end.” The dome plus its shadow image the sphere; either alone images the divided mundane egg of creation, whether heavenly or terrestrial, actual or potential.

Most of the third volume of Bryant’s Mythology is an extended encomiastic account of the people whom he calls the Cuthites, which also seems to have profoundly influenced the structure of “Kubla Khan.” These Cuthites are the same people as Bruce’s Cushites. Bryant says the sons of Chus (or Cush, the eldest son of Ham in the Bible) were

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46 “In a cave in the mountains of Cashmere an Image of Ice, which makes its appearance thus—[""]two days before the new moon there appears a bubble of Ice which increases in size every day till the 15th day, at which it is an ell or more in height; then as the moon decreases, the Image["] does also till it vanishes” (Notebooks, I, 240, G.236).
47 Maurice, p. 52.
giants or Titans who warred against heaven at the foundation of the world, and some of whom were banished to "the vast unfathomable abyss" of the Atlantic Ocean, which according to ancient legend "was so far sunk beneath the confines of the world, that, to express the depth and distance, they imagined, an anvil of iron tossed from the top would not reach it under ten days."\(^48\) Here is a possible source for the caverns measureless to man. The remaining Cuthites "were styled Gods, and Demigods, and the children of Heaven. . . . They pretended to be derived from the Sun; and were called Heliadae, or the Solar Race."\(^49\)

In later days the Cuthites were scattered and widely separated. "The calamities which this people experienced, were so severe, and accumulated, that they were held in remembrance for ages. The memorials of them made a principal part in their rites; and they preserved them also in their hymns. They were generally in a melancholy style; and their musick was adapted to them. The chief subject was the history of the Titanic age, the sufferings of their Gods; and above all the flight of Bacchus, and the scattering of his limbs over the plain of Nusa. To these were added the wanderings of Isis or Demeter; who went over the world to pick up the limbs of the same Bacchus, under the character of Osiris."\(^50\) Here, as Beer conjectured without the support of this passage, is the likely burden of the lament of the woman wailing for her demon-lover.

The Atlantians, Bryant's account continues, "were the same as the Cuthite Erythreans; and the ocean upon which they lived, was called the Erythrean Sea. . . . Strabo has preserved a curious fragment from the Prometheus liberatus of Aeschylus; wherein . . . the poet mentions The sacred waves of the Erythrean Sea; and the vast pool near the ocean, upon the borders of which the Wandering Ethiopians have taken up their residence: where the Sun, that all-seeing Deity, used to refresh his immortal body, and recruit his wearied horses, in the tepid streams of that salutary water."\(^51\) Here we have a further link between Abyssinia and a tradition of lost knowledge associated (as in the myth of Blake) with Lost Atlantis. The sacred waves of the Erythrean Sea may help to explain the "sacred river" in "Kubla Khan," since both are connected symbolically with the sun.\(^52\)

According to Bryant the Cuthites "paid the highest reverence to the

\(^48\) Bryant, III, 59–60.
\(^49\) Ibid., III, 250.
\(^50\) Ibid., III, 273–274.
\(^51\) Ibid., III, 434–435.
\(^52\) Holwell's *Mythological Dictionary* observes that "the ancient Cuthites . . . had a great veneration for Fountains and streams" (p. 197).
memory of their ancestors.” He describes at length the cavern-temples of the Erythreans, and refers to one at Cuma described by Strabo, who “says, that it was inclosed with vast woods, held of old in great veneration; because in them they sacrificed to the manes.” Here is a possible source of the “forests ancient as the hills,” which, as we have seen, are symbolically linked with the “ancestral voices prophesying war.” Bryant continues:

As the whole of Upper Egypt was closely bounded on each side by mountains, all the floods which descended from the higher regions, and from Abyssinia, must have come with uncommon violence. The whole face of the country affords evidence of their impetuosity in the first ages, before they had borne down those obstacles by which their descent was impeded. As the soil was by degrees washed away, many rocks were left bare; and may still be seen rough and rude in a variety of directions. Some stand up single; others of immense size lie transverse, and incumbent upon those below: and seem to shew, that they are not in their natural situation, but have been shattered and overturned by some great convulsion of nature. The Egyptians look upon these with a degree of veneration.

Here, it would seem, is a source for Coleridge’s “huge fragments” which “vaulted like rebounding hail” when thrown up by the fountain of the sacred river.

The reason for Coleridge’s change of the Crewe MS “Mount Amara,” first to “Mount Amora,” then to “Mount Abora,” is not hard to fathom. Mount Amara, “where Abassin kings their issue guard,” was under the taint of the Miltonic imputation that it was the site of a false paradise. “Amora,” while suggesting “Amor vincit omnia,” with all that implies, was at once too ambiguous and too hackneyed. “Abora,” on the other hand, had the right sound and none of the wrong connotations. In fact, it had most of the right connotations. According to Bryant, there was “an Hyperborean of great fame called Abaris, who is mentioned by Herodotus. He was the son of Zeuth, styled Seuthes: and he is represented as very knowing in the art of divination, and gifted with supernatural powers. Apollo is said to have lent him a golden arrow, upon which he was wafted through the air, and visited all the regions in the world. He neither eat, nor drank; but went over the earth, uttering oracles, and presaging to nations, what was to come.” “This,” comments Bryant, “seems to be an imaginary character; and probably relates to the various migrations of the sons of Chus, and the introduction of their religion into different parts of the world.”

53 Bryant, III, 274, 500.
54 Ibid., III, 531.
55 Ibid., III, 497.
likely, Mount Abora is in any way linked with Abaris, the Abyssinian maid singing of the mountain would be singing of the original focal unity of the Cuthites, human and divine, as represented by a holy mountain, itself shaped not unlike an arrow.

Beer points out that "Abor" appears on the second page of Holwell's Mythological Dictionary with the comment that "the Sun was called Abor, the parent of light." He also observes that Beth-Abara was the place where Jesus was baptized and where the holy spirit descended on him "like a dove." These sources likewise point to a symbolic nexus of sun-worship and apotheosis. The vision of the damsel with a dulcimer singing of Mount Abora is the redemptive counterpart to that of the woman wailing beneath a waning moon for her demon-lover, as the poem moves from anticipation of the Fall to regeneration, and from sparagmos to reintegration.

Finally, and most important of all, Bryant provides the probable basis for Coleridge's association of Abyssinia with Kubla Khan, hitherto regarded by some critics as one of the most formidable obstacles to the poem's unity. He says the eastern or Indo-Ethiopian Cuthites settled between the Indus and Ganges, and one of their principal regions was called Cathaia, rendered Cathaia by the Grecians... [The Cuthites] sent out large bodies into different parts; and many of the Tartarian nations are descended from them. They got possession of the upper part of China, which they denominated Cathaia: and there is reason to think that Japan was in some degree peopled by them. ... The Cuthites worshipped Cham, the Sun; whose name they variously compounded. In China most things, which have any reference to splendour and magnificence, seem to be denominated from the same object. Cham is said in the language of that country to signify anything supreme. ... Cambalu, the name of the ancient metropolis, is the city of Cham-Bul: and Milton styles it very properly, Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Chan. By this is meant the chief seat of the Cuthean Monarch.

Bryant goes on to describe the temples and gilded idols which Marco Polo saw in Cathaia "in the time of the Tartar Emperor Cublai Chan," and conjectures that they represented a form of Cuthite sun-worship. He also refers specifically to the temple at Kam-ju [Xamdu = Xanadu],

56 Beer, p. 256. Garland H. Cannon, "A New Probable Source for 'Kubla Khan,'" College English, 18 (1955), 136-142, suggests that "Mount Abora" comes from the Abor hills of N. India, and cites the probable influence of Sir W. Jones's "Hymn to Ganga" (1785). The relevance of both these sources is increased by Bryant's above-quoted remarks about the Ethiopians' descent from the Hindus. 57 Bryant, III, 533, 557-558.
which had in it a huge sleeping idol gilt all over, and likewise concludes that it was erected to Cham, the Sun.58

Thus Kubla Khan and his followers are identified as of Cuthite or Ethiopian descent, and are directly related to a tradition of sun-worship and occult knowledge traceable to the Atlantians and the giants or Titans who warred against heaven at the foundation of the world.

To return to the poem: the first part of it is set in the golden age, of which thirteenth-century Xanadu with its Cuthean monarch is a symbol. The "Ancestral voices prophesying war" are the voices of the giants or Titans, Kubla's ancestors, who warred against heaven and are prophesying a similar falling away from Kubla's terrestrial paradise. To the objection that Xanadu is here functioning both as a symbolical representation of the unfallen world and as a literal representation of the world after the Fall, one need only observe that it is the nature of symbolism, particularly in Romantic poetry, to preserve a certain ironic ambivalence, and that Coleridge's own definition of symbolism, "the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal," points to the same quality.

Irene Chayes observes:

From time to time, critics have glancingly identified the two worlds that emerge from the opposing descriptions [in st. 1 and 2], the "paradisal" and the "infernal," with the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the mind; actually such an identification is fundamental to the meaning of the first two stanzas. The total landscape in cross section, from Kubla Khan's pleasure ground through the chasms to the caverns and the underground sea, is at once the content of the vision in a dream and a pictorial diagram of the operation of the dreamer's mind during the whole experience. More precisely, the landscape with its descending levels would be the mind as structure, and the process within it, summed up in the flowing of the river, meandering with a mazy motion, the mind as activity.59

Bearing Miss Chayes' comments in mind, if we compare the scene described in the first thirty-six lines of the poem with Blake's myth, what we are invited to behold is a tripartite scheme of three levels of existence, hence of the mind, each mirroring the others, and corresponding to Blake's Eden, Beulah, and Ulro. The "sunny dome with caves of ice!" symbolizes Eden, where opposition is true friendship; the fertile gardens, still fallen, are Beulah, "where Contrarieties are equally

58 Ibid., III, 569.
59 Chayes, p. 7. Miss Chayes' remarks concerning "the dreamer's mind" are concerned with the total impression conveyed by the poem, not with theories relating to the manner in which Coleridge composed the poem.
True”; and the “caverns measureless to man” and the “sunless sea” correspond to Ulro and the Lake of Udan Adan. The “sacred river” of divine Truth runs through and unites these three levels. The fourth level—generation—is not yet born. It corresponds to the level on which the “anti-Edenic” critics read the poem, and its absence, except in posse, doubtless accounts for their confusion. Hence, their difficulty in explaining why Coleridge describes the scene so lavishly, and why he wants to emulate Kubla by building “that dome in air,” a phrase which again points to the heavenly or spiritual quality of the dome.

It is possible, by emphasizing the phrase “in air,” to imply a contrast between the dome decreed by Kubla and the dome which the poet proposes to build; but the context seems to require that the primary rhetorical emphasis be placed upon “I” at the beginning of this line—“I would build that dome in air”—and the meaning may well be that Kubla’s dome surrounded by trees and gardens appeared to be hovering in the air because of the symmetry and gracefulness of its construction.\(^{60}\)

In either case there is implied both a parallel and a contrast between the poet’s activity and Kubla’s: both are creating as it were through the word, by fiat; but only the poet is his own workman. The main point however is that only if we accept Kubla’s dome as symbolizing God’s creation, and specifically the heavenly portion of it, does the poet’s wish to emulate Kubla’s achievement make sense. As one of the poem’s more literal-minded critics has complained, “It is not easy to believe that a Romantic would compare his act of artistic creation, except ironically, with a potentate’s erection of an outbuilding.”\(^{61}\) There is irony in the poem, though it points in the opposite direction from this quotation. Like Blake’s Los, who continually builds the city of Golgo-nooza, the poet of “Kubla Khan” wishes to participate wholly in the construction of a palace of art which will be recognized as a symbol, hence a portion, of God’s heavenly creation—in Christian terms, the New Jerusalem. But the poem is deliberately set outside the orthodox Christian tradition in order to emphasize the independence of the poetic vision from any one set of beliefs or dogmas.

The irony is that the poet has come closer to succeeding than he seems to realize. This comic irony determines the tone, and therefore the meaning, of the poem’s conclusion, beginning with the lines, “A damsels

\(^{60}\) Bryant, III, 565, records Thevenot’s description of a temple atop a mountain hewn out of the rock by the Indo-Cuthites in such a way that “it is really a wonder to see so great a mass in the air, which seems so slenderly underpropped, that one can hardly help shuddering at first entering it” (italics added).

with a dulcimer/ In a vision once I saw." It also gives a final ironic twist to the poem's structure. As we have seen, the cyclical course of the river Alph symbolizes eternity; it also symbolizes the cyclical structure of the poem, in which, as Boehme said of the creation, "the End finds the Beginning, and the Beginning swallows up the end again." Someone has written, "[On reading] 'I would build that dome in air' . . . the reader's first instinct is to say that this is just what Coleridge has done. But this is evidently quite wrong." In reading lyrical poetry, one's first instinct is never completely wrong. What Coleridge has done is to leave a rhetorical gap between conception and execution, in order to establish an oscillation in the reader's mind, and thus stimulate the reader to a creative and imaginative response. Shelley uses the same technique in the last stanza of "To A Skylark":

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then—as I am listening now.

Here, as in the concluding lines of "Kubla Khan," is the furor poeticus raised to the nth degree:

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song
To such a deep delight 'twould win me
That with music loud and long
I would build that dome in air
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there
And all should cry, Beware, beware,
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Some critics have regarded this conclusion as despairing; but the majority have responded to it as a triumphant affirmation of the divine potentialities of poetry—and they are right. This should be evident even without one's awareness of the echoes of Plato's Ion in these lines; with

62 Forty Questions, I, 118. See Miss Chayes' remark, "the contents of the planned poem would be substantially the same as the events in the first two stanzas of 'Kubla Khan.' This is a point whose significance has not been sufficiently appreciated" (p. 18).
63 Watson, p. 25.
such awareness, the meaning becomes transparently clear. The poet sees himself as one of a succession of seers and singers of eternal realities, working to overcome the ravages of the Fall by restoring to man "at once and ever" a sense of imaginative fulfilment. If the poet is transported to heaven at the end of this poem, it is the perceptive reader who does the transporting.


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