eradicated, we may now see how the events of the play fall readily into place. We no longer have to ask, "What happens in Hamlet?" Above all, we no longer have to puzzle over Hamlet's behavior or to wrestle with Freudian and other theories, for the Prince's delays and inconsistencies are now easily explicable. He seems to have utter proof of Claudius' guilt, but it is from sources that will not stand up in any court. For example, you cannot hail a Ghost before the judge. Hamlet quite justifiably becomes suspicious of the Ghost's story. Very well, he will test it—and does so in the play-within-a-play. But even after that "proof" he is still, at least subconsciously, in doubt: even when Claudius, in self-defense, is trying to do away with him, Hamlet is not wholly sure. He asks Horatio, in the very last scene of the play, if it is not now "perfect conscience" to kill the king. He could not ask this question if, deep inside, he did not harbor a doubt, an uncertainty. Thus Hamlet's delays are clearly explained by the conflict between the apparent facts, which are not facts at all, and the promptings of his instincts or soul or subconscious, which are right. And the simplicity of the explanation is the measure of its superiority to the ingenious and fanciful theories hitherto proffered.

A final word: Although the play seems most depressing if read in this way—the hero dead because he operated under a delusion, the villain triumphant and ready to take the spoils of triumph—we must shun the compulsive desire for a happy ending, or at least an ending in which evil is roundly punished. The Hollywood movies, of which we have all seen too many, invariably punish the villain at the end. In life, unfortunately, it is not always so. Shakespeare was too great an artist to pretend that it is.

The Romantic Unity of "Kubla Khan"

RICHARD HARTER FOGLE

In his valuable book on Keats' Craftsman ship, M. R. Ridley has cited Kubla Khan along with the "magic casements" passage of Keats's "Nightingale" ode as the very essence of "the distilled sorceries of Romanticism," and his statement is more or less typical. This concept of "romantic magic" has its sanction and is by no means to be discarded as pointless. In practice, however, it has had the unfortunate effect of discouraging critical analysis; and it likewise plays into the hands of those of our contemporaries who incline to look upon Romantic poetry as a kind of moonlit mist, which dissolves at the touch of reality and reason.

The fascinating but uncritical study of Lowes, with its emphasis upon the irrational and the unconscious, and its unthinking quest for sources, has had an equally unfortunate and discouraging influence. Only recently, with the work of Elisabeth Schneider and others who have pointed the way, has it become possible to think of Kubla Khan as other than a kind of magnificent freak and to treat it as an intelligible poem which lies open to critical examination. And the influence of Lowes still imposes upon

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1 Tulane University. Author of The Imagery of Keats and Shelley (University of North Carolina Press, 1949).
the student the tyranny of source study. He has opened so wide a field for speculation that scholars are still inclined rather to revise or enlarge his conclusions than to proceed to the task of the critic.

The study of possible sources for Coleridge’s imagery is valuable. Whatever we can get, in fact, in the way of information on the genesis and the circumstances of a poem is useful. Such information, however, can be dangerous if we exaggerate its function and substitute it for the poem itself. It is background, not foreground. To discover, for instance, a parallel between a passage in Plato and a poem of Coleridge is valuable when it adds to the poem’s potential meaning; but the discovery is misused if Plato is permitted to determine what Coleridge is talking about. The proper place to study Coleridge’s poetry is ultimately The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

By implication the foregoing incautious remarks bind this essay to a twofold effort: first, to give such an account of Kubla Khan’s “distilled sorceries” and “romantic magic” as will reconcile them with the rational and discursive processes of criticism; and, second, to account for them within the bounds of the poem. As to the first, no one need fear that our “romantic magic” will be dispelled, such a Pyrrhic victory as that lying quite beyond either the powers or the wishes of the present writer. As to the second, I hope for a generously loose construction as to what the bounds of the poem include.

A number of contentions must precede the specific examination of Kubla Khan. First, the immediate literary effect intended and obtained in it by Coleridge is pleasure—a pleasure which derives from that very “Romantic sorcery” of which we have spoken. This pleasure, as Pope says of Nature, is “the source, and end, and test” of poetic art. It is not necessary, of course, to claim that Coleridge has found the only means of attaining it. Second, this pleasure is in no way incompatible with even the profoundest meaning; is in fact inseparable from meaning. The basic criterion for poetry is in the broadest sense human interest: a poem should deal with a human situation of universal interest treated with sympathy, judgment, and insight. This human significance is not to be regarded as a monopoly of the classical or neoclassical humanist but belongs to the Romantic poet as well. Third, Kubla Khan embodies the Coleridgean doctrine of “the reconciliation of opposites.” On this point be it added that the authority of the poem is at least equal to prose definitions of these doctrines; it is the living word, as opposed to the skeleton of abstract definition. Neither, however, is fully intelligible without the other. Finally, Kubla Khan is in the most essential sense a completed work, in that it symbolizes and comprehends the basic Romantic dilemma, a crucial problem of art.

To avoid misunderstanding, let us preface interpretation of the poem with a self-evident but necessary distinction. Kubla Khan is “fanciful” rather than “realistic”; the simplest, most basic pleasure it provides stems rather from its distance from actuality than from any versimilitude or skilful imitation of matter of fact. It belongs in the category of what Dryden called “the fairy way of poetry,” and consideration of its meaning must be controlled by our understanding of this limitation. With this conceded, however, we can still demonstrate the immensely important fact of its basic humanity and significance. The
setting of *Kubla Khan* is pleasurable and well removed from any contact with the sharp edges of the actual; yet within its enchanted garden we shall find problems of the weightiest import. Thus the central situation of the poem is the spacious pleasure-garden of Kubla:

So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round.

And the poem itself is embodied in this garden, various, extensive, yet inclosed from the world without. But our estimate of the situation is incomplete if it ignores the implications of the towered walls. A reality against which we must fortify ourselves is hardly a reality which we can ignore. We must then extend our definition to include this implication and consider the core of the poem to reside in an opposition or stress between the garden, artificial and finite, and the indefinite, inchoate, and possibly turbulent outside world.

Since, however, what lies beyond the walls is only implied, not imaged, we must pass to whatever relationships exist inside them.

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

This 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 pleasure-dome is associated with Man, as Kubla is an emblem of Man; it figures his desire for pleasure and safety; it stands for strictly human and finite values. The image of the dome suggests agreeable sensations of roundedness 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 the chosen refuge of Kubla the mighty, the emperor whose every whim is law, who would have temptations toward *hubris*. It is the center of his retreat in his haughty withdrawal from a world unworthy of him. It 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 the human Kubla.

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.

This description hints, however, that Nature here is an uneasy prisoner, or perhaps a prisoner who is bounded only during her own pleasure. The “forests ancient” suggest an existence unknown to man and uncoerced by human power, whose sway over it is temporary and precarious. It is a force and being unlike Man, busy about its own purposes and, like the serpent, inscrutable in the labyrinthine wanderings of the “sinuous rills” of the gardens.

Here one may affirm that this setting illustrates a typical Romantic conception of “the reconciliation of opposites” by means of a concrete, visual scene. By a process of shading and gradation in light and dark, in garden and forest, oppositions become blended, interfused, and unified; and this visual unification extends to the feelings and ideas which the scene evokes. This is the Romantic “picturesque,” more fully to be seen in...
the landscape of Wordsworth’s “Lines . . . above Tintern Abbey,” with its complex blending of sky and valley, of Man and Nature, objectified in blending and gradation of color and form. In _Kubla Khan_ the effect permits us simultaneously and with no sense of paradox or jar to receive the gardens as the elaborate plaything of a great potentate, the emblem of his pride, exclusiveness, and power, and also as an ironic commentary upon the impossibility of any real ownership of Nature.

These oppositions, however, are only a subtheme or prelude. The river is the true exemplar of nonhuman forces, subhuman and superhuman alike. Even the “deep romantic chasm” of its rising is incompatible with the order of Kubla’s pleasure-grounds. It “slants athwart”; it cuts across the pattern. The simile of the “woman wailing for her demon-lover” invests it with the supernatural, the Arabian Nights wonder and fear of the jinni, beings unfriendly to man and yet obscurely connected with him.

Of the river itself most noticeable is the brevity of its surface course in relation to the hidden potentialities of its subterranean flowing:

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Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean. . . .
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Treated as a whole and in its relationship with the dome and the pleasure-grounds, the river is the primordial and the irrational, whatever lies beyond the control of the rational and conscious mind. The power of the source, vividly imaged in the dancing rocks—

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And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced
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Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:
And ’mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river . . . —

is a power beyond mortal man, even beyond Kubla Khan. This source is creation and birth, a force and urge at once frenetic and turbulent and also rhythmical and regular. At the mouth is death, icy and lifeless, where Alph in tumult returns to the underground. As with the source, powers unknown and uncontrollable are at work, descending at last to quiescence. Here are potentialities not of death absolutely but relative to what can be imagined and experienced.

Thus the opposition between river and dome. But here we must shift our emphasis, as previously with the pleasure-grounds themselves, more fully to Alph. The river is human life, past, present, and future, birth, life, and death. For five miles it runs upon the surface, consents, “meandering with a mazy motion,” to harmonize with the order of Kubla’s estate, to yield to his power. It is like Bede’s famous bird which flies in a moment through the warm hall, swiftly proceeding from unknown birth to unknown death. And Kubla in his pleasure-dome is Man, living in his special cosmos of palace and garden, but hearing

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. . . the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves. . . .
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Impulses unaccountable, creative and deadly alike, comprehending more of life than the reason can grasp. It is amid the tumult that Kubla hears the ominous prophecy of war, and this from the dying, the caves of ice. The poem as narrative can go no further than this, for the destruction is implied of Kubla’s elaborate and artificial escape. The complex order and equilibrium of his existence are over-
set by the mere hint. This statement implies, of course, that the pattern must not within the poem be broken and that Kubla is never to emerge from his walled pleasure-grounds.

Yet in an important sense the pattern is broken in that Coleridge continues the lyric but abandons the story. Suddenly the imagery shifts to the “damsel with a dulcimer.” This damsel, the Abyssinian maid, is most simply comparable to the muse invoked by the classical poet. She has, as has been suggested, a relation to Milton’s heavenly muse Urania, as the stimulating speculations about the source of “Mount Abora” indicate. It is valuable to compare her also, as does Miss Schneider, to Platonic inspiration, the *furor poeticus* of the bard. Appropriately, however, to Coleridge’s Romanticism and to the special context of *Kubla Khan*, she is wild and remote, with the glamour and terror of a far-off, mysterious land, marvelous, inaccessible, yet rich with the significant associations of literature. So Keats in a lyric much akin to *Kubla Khan*:

I saw parched Abyssinia rouse and sing
To the silver cymbals’ ring!
I saw the whelming vintage hotly pierce
Old Tartary the fierce!—

The damsel is as well the ideal singer, the archetypal poet. The transmission of her song, if transmission there could be, would be like the conception of imitation in Longinus, where the divine fire passes from poet to poet, and Plato emulates Homer in the beneficent rivalry of genius. But Coleridge is modest, with the clear sense that the song can never be equaled:

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....

The phrase “deep delight” carries us into the problem of pleasure, more especially into the problem of the pleasure which the particular poem *Kubla Khan* should provide. This delight is for Coleridge as well as Wordsworth the prerequisite of poetic creation, the imaginative joy and effluence described in “Dejection: An Ode.” But here it is also an effect peculiar to the poem itself: a kind of magic, an apparently naïve delight in the presentation of wonders, and in gorgeous images evoked in imagination in the sort of pleasure suggested by the classic ancient accounts of Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus.

This pleasure is also partly from variety and fulness—wonders which satisfy, as for a child at a carnival. These qualities are embodied not only in the imagery but in fulness and variety of melodic movement in the verse, which would bear more thorough discussion than can be given here. The word “symphony” in line 43 is not lightly or carelessly used. The delight is rounded and completed by the dark tinge of the “deep romantic chasm,” the turbulent power of the river, the doom of the ancestral voices, and lastly by the mingling of dread and enchantment in the closing lines, where the holiness of the inspired poet is in a sense unholy too, an affair as it were of the infernal gods as much as the clear deity of Apollo.

The interpretation in earlier pages has attempted to demonstrate an essential profundity and universality in the theme of *Kubla Khan*. It remains to assert that pleasure is in no way incompatible with significance. In some contemporary poetry and criticism there seems implicit the notion that it is somehow dishonest and shameful to please, an attitude which has tellingly been termed “the new
Puritanism.” One feels inclined to re-
new the old question, “Dost thou think, be-
cause thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” But in *Kubla Khan*, as probably in all good Romantic poetry, the pleasure which draws us within the poem is also inseparable from its full meaning. Imaginative delight in the wonders of the pleasure-ground is indispen-
sable to the sense of their oppo-
site. Fully to appreciate the theme’s potentialities, we must be beguiled into believing momentarily in the perma-
nency of the impermanent, the possibil-
ity of the impossible. The fullest mean-
ing, a synthesis of antitheses, calls for feeling and imagination at full stretch, reconciled with intellectual scope and understanding. And pleasure, one may claim, is the basis and beginning of the process.

Our final contention re-emphasizes the depth and significance of *Kubla Khan*. It is in the truest sense a com-
pleted work, in that it symbolizes and comprehends the crucial Romantic di-
lemma. In a more obvious sense it is clearly unfinished: as a narrative it bare-
ly commences, and it shifts abruptly with the Abyssinian maid from objective to subjective. Considered as lyric, how-
ever, it is self-contained and whole. The Romantic poet as idealist and monist strives to include within his cosmos both actual and ideal, as in Coleridge, Words-
worth, Shelley, even Byron, and to some extent Keats. His attempt, however, co-
exists with his consciousness that he seeks the unattainable; the ideal can never be fully actualized. Thus in good Romantic poetry there is a continuous tension, compacted of the sense of the immense potentialities of his theme set off against the knowledge that they can only partially be realized. This tension and conflict can be reconciled and ren-
dered valuable partly by the poet’s own belief in the value of the attempt itself. The poet excels himself as it were by force; he is stimulated to creation rather than falling into despair. Above all, he benefits by understanding and accepting his dilemma even while trying to rise above it nonetheless.

And this is eminently the case with *Kubla Khan*. Coleridge provides a scene and experience too fine for common na-
ture’s daily food. With exquisite judg-
ment he forbears the attempt to explain what can only be hinted and dramatizes instead what is lost in the very act of relinquishing it. But amid the master-
artist’s skillful manipulation of interest and suspense, his suggestions of “more than meets the eye,” is the human inter-
est, the complexity and spacious grasp, without which the rest would be nothing, could not separately exist. Properly understood, Romantic poetry is never a cheat, although it often labors under the disadvantage of being extremely agree-
able.