



LYRICAL DREAM OR TYRANNICAL DESIRE: LOCATING JUNG IN KUBLAKHAN

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Abstract

In his celebrated poem Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge explores the theme of rebirth through poetic vision, contrasting the autocratic creativity of Kubla with the inspired lyricism of the true poet. Coleridge's metaphorical "crucifixion" and "resurrection" symbolize the poetic struggle and the longing to regenerate lost inspiration. Kubla's attempt to immortalize his legacy through architectural grandeur is marked by authoritarian control and detachment, doomed to decay, unlike the poet's envisioned creation "in air" that aspires to transcendence through subjective engagement. Drawing on Jung's concept of "indirect rebirth," the poet participates in transformation, unlike Kubla, who merely commands it. Coleridge aligns himself with a Western philosophical lineage—from Homer to Kant—that venerates the poet as a prophetic figure. However, both Kubla and the poet ultimately fail—Kubla due to political instability, and the poet due to the limits of human finitude. Their shared failure underlines the Romantic skepticism of total control or perfect artistic realization, privileging inner vision and imaginative participation over material domination.

Keywords

Coleridge, Poetic imagination, Rebirth, Romanticism, Jung, etc.

Full Article

In a letter to J.J. Morgan on May 14, 1814, Coleridge writes "If it could be said with as little appearance of profaneness, as there is feeling or intention in my mind, I might affirm; that I had been crucified, dead, and buried, descended into Hell, and am now I humbly trust, rising again, tho' slowly and gradually (Halmi, 638-639)." What is seemingly an account of the poet's recuperation from illness, speaks a lot about his unflinching trust in rebirth or at least, some sort of an afterlife. In fact, the entire description has the latent echo of the resurrection myth of Christ. In 'Kubla Khan', it is this resurrection of the latent, fixed and dead that plays a significant role, as per the recorded history of the composition of the text is concerned. Between what the poet had the vision of, the near automated composition that immediately followed, the interruption caused by the Person from Porlock and the eventual melting away of the vision creating the affect of angst – what stands apart as the essential poetic desire is to recreate, regenerate and resurrect the lost. In his own account of the loss of the vision, Coleridge quotes Theocritus: "I'll e'en sing you a sweeter song another day" and laments on the same breath, "...but the to-morrow is yet to come" (Coleridge, 181). The entire composition thus finds itself in the framework of an unrequited desire of rebirth.

The poem, as it has been well known, contrasts the creations of two specific kinds. While the despotic creation of Kubla, with all its pomp and grandeur is found to be limited in its creativity as well as the reach of its affect against the illumined poetic creation that would simultaneously be 'loud' enough to reach 'all' and 'long' enough to reach the terrains of



Abyssinia to the mythic plain of Mount Abora. Interestingly, both the creators wish, through their works, to transcend the physicality and its consequent limitations. Kubla wants to build a dome and a garden that would make the onlooker stare at awe, not at the deep, savage forest around, but at his architecture. On the other hand, the inspired poet would desire to build the dome 'in air', thereby resisting the very limitation of physical existence on Earth itself. The central difference between the deeds is, according to the poem's scheme, in the participatory subjectivity. While Kubla would 'decree' his royal dome, the inspired lyric poet would thumpingly declare the triumph of subjectivity:

“Could I reveive 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” (Coleridge, 183)

Evidently, while Kubla's dome would be threatened of imminent destruction by the voices of the ancestors 'prophesying war', the proposed poetic creation would, of course, live on. Carl Gustav Jung in his discussion on the archetype of rebirth may however locate in both the despotic and the poetic, the selfsame desire of 'indirect rebirth' (Jung, 55). To quote Jung, “Here the transformation is brought about not directly, by passing through death and rebirth oneself, but indirectly, by participating in a process of transformation which is conceived of as taking place outside the individual (Jung, 56).” What Jung emphasizes upon is the aspect of 'participating', something that Coleridge too eulogizes in the poem. Interestingly, the process of rebirth, to Jung, is something that is essentially outside the subject but the subject needs to be intimately mired in the process; unlike Kubla who is decreeing the creation and hoping the same to be the adequate process of his emerging as the tamer of Nature.

Now, the process that Coleridge sublimates over the one of Kubla, namely that of the involved lyric poet, has a tradition in Eurocentric literature that dates back to Homer. In fact, while discussing the archetype of 'indirect rebirth', Jung refers to the Eleusinian mystery. The ancient Greek myth refers to Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and fertility who caused severe drought on Earth as a ploy to draw Zeus' attention on her lost daughter Persephone who was abducted by Pluto, the god of the underworld. On Persephone's return, the Earth got back her greenery as Demeter ended the drought. This is a classic tale of rebirth of the land caused through personal angst and ecstasy; an involvement that Coleridge specifically emphasizes upon. It is the same subjective association that Homer too talks about in his celebrated 'Hymn to Demeter': “Blessed is he among men who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiated and has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom (Jung, 57).” Kubla falls in the exact trap. He essentially has 'no part' in his creation. By the same logic, while the poet may claim immortality, he only hears the warnings of the forthcoming destruction. Hence the poet would resurrect his dream vision and in the process he would assert his right of reinvigoration on the face of nature that is always willing to disenfranchise all the mortals from.

Evidently, Kubla too wanted a similar assertion of rebirth as he built a dome that would remind the onlooker of his might every time she looks at the architectural behemoth. What is seemingly an announcement of immortality is actually a more insidious desire of reinvigoration with every passing appreciation. This autocratic desire is something that the romantics tirelessly mocked at. One might bring in the reference of P. B. Shelley's 'Ozymandias in Egypt' where the mighty monarch would nurture the similar aspiration from the appreciation of posterity – a rebirth



with the affect of each appreciation. However, Nature did overwhelm and what remained was a pyrrhic joke:

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away”
(Shelley: poetryfoundation.org)

Evidently, the dissociated creation is sure to fail in asserting rebirth; and that is a Romantic talisman. The despotic would never attain the rebirth that it desperately desires. The poet would surely locate the failure in the attempt and in ‘Kubla Khan, Coleridge would celebrate the poetic enterprise of attaining the same. Incidentally, this would set the inspired lyric poet apart, not only from the despots but from the common humanity as well. Hence the commoners would be wary of the ‘flashing eyes’ and the ‘floating hair’ of him. They would surely weave the protective trinity of circle around him.

As Coleridge records such readers’ response, he consciously places himself in the long tradition of European intelligentsia that viewed and represented the inspired poet in that line. His description of the poet towards the end of ‘Kubla Khan’ has the reference of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where it says: “Poet’s eyes in fine frenzy rolling” (shakespeare.edu). As Coleridge mentions the source of the poet’s inspiration to the ‘honeydew’ and ‘the milk of Paradise’, the informed reader would surely recall Plato’s *Ion*, where the figure of the inspired lyric poet whose songs “are the sweets they cull from the honey-dropping founts, in certain gardens and the glades of the Muses” (Coleridge, 183). As far as the terrified affect that the poet cast on the commons, the roots of this can be traced back to Plato again who discarded the poets from his republic fearing they might cause disruptions with their inspired visions. Such a portrayal of the poet does not quite end with Coleridge. More than a century later, W. B. Yeats in his celebrated lyric ‘An Acre of Grass’ would consider this frenzied vision to the poet’s own and desperately desires to rekindle the same in his old age. If we go through the relevant lines of Yeats, it would make the aspiration of rebirth palpable:

Grant me an old man’s frenzy,
Myself must I remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till truth obeyed his call (Yeats in poemhunter.com)

Thus, what Coleridge emerges in the context is one of the many in a long line of tradition that considered the Poet to be capable of redesigning and reinvigorating life, albeit in not the most commonplace manner, and in doing so what he sublimates is the power of the subjective intellectualism over the other faculties.

This opens the scope to discuss Coleridge’s theory of imagination that he considered to be the roof and crown of subjectivity and intellectualism. No wonder, in the celebrated Chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*, in his attempt to establish imagination as an esemplastic power, Coleridge invokes Descartes. In a little whirlwind of an opening passage, Coleridge writes:



DES CARTES, speaking as a naturalist, and in imitation of Archimedes, said, give me matter and motion and I will construct you the universe. We must of course understand him to have meant; I will make the construction of the world intelligible. In the same sense the transcendental philosopher says; grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to find itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you. Every other science pre-supposes intelligence as already existing and complete: the philosopher contemplates it in its growth, and as it were represents its history to the mind from its birth to its maturity (Coleridge, 482-483).

Thus Coleridge not only situates imagination in the Cartesian premise of 'cogito' but simultaneously locates the faculty and its exercise in the long line of Renaissance-Enlightenment tradition of Europe that ranges from Archimedes to Immanuel Kant, whom he referred to as 'The venerable Sage of Koenigsberg' (Coleridge, 483). Evidently, in the second part of the passage Coleridge was referring to the Kantian notion of 'negative magnitude' that Kant explained at length in *Vermische Schriften* and 'Walford': "A magnitude is, relative to another magnitude, negative, in so far as it can only be combined with it by means of opposition" (Coleridge, 484).

What Coleridge therefore does with his theory of imagination is to form an Eliotesque tradition about it. Thus the lyrical poet who is sublimated over the autocratic monarch is thus not merely an assortment of independent self and its autonomous expressions but one in the long line of a glorious retinue. Hence the desire of the poet in 'Kubla Khan' to resurrect his dream is in the typical desire of rebirth through, what Jung terms as the 'enlargement of personality (Jung, 62).' Jung extends two archetypal illustrations to explain the same. The first being St. Paul and Jesus Christ. Regarding the two's meeting at Damascus, Jung says: "True though it may be that this Christ of St. Paul's would hardly have been possible without the historical Jesus, the apparition of Christ came to St. Paul not from the historical Jesus but from the depths of his own consciousness (Jung, 63)." The second example is of Nietzsche and Zarathustra. To Jung: "When a summit of life is reached, when the bud unfolds and from the lesser the greater emerges, then, as Nietzsche says 'One becomes Two', and the greater figure, which one always was but which remained invisible, appears to the lesser personality with the force of a revelation (Jung, 63)." Hence the poet who found his vision blurred by anodyne can aspire to attain the heights that Archimedes to Kant desire to achieve.

Kubla's creation is seemingly in the negative magnitude of the poet's. In his quest to lord over Nature, what Kubla builds is a proud behemoth that has a tradition of its own: the tradition of destruction of royal pride; something that the 'ancestral voices' affirm. This is the tradition of instability and decay. Interestingly, for the poet what was the Jungian enlargement of personality, the consciousness that makes Kubla aware of the tradition of his is more like the 'cryptomnesia' or hidden memory (Noll, 66). The unseen but near certain destruction of his dome is not a knowledge that Kubla derived from the 'logos' of the inscribed past; unlike Coleridge who has a detailed, narrated and enumerated theory of poetic frenzy and potentials thereof. It was more like the meditated wisdom that Kubla received after deep contemplation over nature. While this places Kubla in the Eastern mystic light, Coleridge's sublimation of the lyric poet's potency is more like the prescribed certainty of codified spiritual upliftment procedure of the Western religious tradition. Such codified spiritual practice, in the Jungian argument, may be traced back to 'Exercitia Spiritualia' of Ignatius Loyola (Jung, 76). Coleridge's belittling of Kubla's meditative wisdom would find its rationale in the Western notion of spiritual exercise itself as the latter



claims “only the person meditating is allowed to speak, whereas the inner responses are passed over as being merely human and therefore to be repudiated (Jung, 76-77).”

The crisis thus is evidently in the dialectics of the Eastern meditative philosophy and the Western prophetic ideal. But whatsoever is the consequence, in the paradigm of the text, the representatives of both are failures in their own way. The mediataive wisdom of Kubla has exposed to him the failure of his hubris while the conditional ‘Could I’ at the final stanza denotes that the lyric poet with all his inspiration could not quite erect the dome in the air! While the failure of the poet is because of the ingrained restriction and limitation of the human frame, the failure of Kubla – the imminent destruction of the dome because of war- has a certain political complexity. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari point at the fundamental opposition in state machinery regarding warfare:

There are many reasons to believe that the war machine is of a different origin, is a different assemblage, than the State apparatus. It is of nomadic origin and is directed against the State apparatus. One of the fundamental problems of the State is to appropriate this war machine that is foreign to it and make it a piece in its apparatus, in the form of a stable military institution; and the State has always encountered major difficulties in this (Deleuze and Guattari, 312).

As the poet failed to accommodate the Kantian negative magnitude in the physical reality of human frame, Kubla too failed to make warfare, an essential supplement of the State machinery, from turning rogue. The poet and the despot, in their attempt of rebirth, thus suffer the similar consequence of profound despondency.

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