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Coleridge and Dante: Kinship in Xanadu

Michael Greer

The serious student of Coleridge must recognize John Livingston Lowes' *The Road To Xanadu* as an exciting, revealing explication of "Kubla Khan" and most of its very probable sources. In *The Road To Xanadu* Lowes acknowledges Dante as an influence on "The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner"; but in this piece I wish to suggest that somewhere in the mysterious history of Coleridge's great poetic fragment, somewhere cached in that unique 'Shaping spirit of Imagination' exists a more profound Dantean shadow than may normally be suspected.

The ultimate effect of Purchas, Bartram, Bruce and Maurice on Coleridge's subconscious is well established by Lowes; and after having taught the fragment to hundreds of college literature students I have no doubt that "Kubla Khan" is symbolically representative of the subconscious-to-conscious creation of a work of art in general. But it can be shown, if only piecemeal, that the forces exerted on the growth of the fragment by the *Inferno* are too evident to be pigeonholed as literary coincidence.

The dedicated reader of "Kubla Khan" must detect a structural pattern, of course, but over and above that, he must be aware of movement, of a peristaltic motion that sweeps the images along, wave upon wave. This motion exists regardless of the interpretation applied to the poem. Only the direction of this motion is altered.

For example, if we do consider the subconscious-to-conscious genesis of the poem, or any poem for that matter, the motion appears to be in an upward direction, ejaculating from the 'caves of ice' to the 'sunny pleasure dome' carrying the embryos of verse from egg to larva to maturity, the 'huge fragments vaulted,' till they burst into the conscious awareness like butterflies from cocoons.

From the Dantean viewpoint, the movement is, for the most part, a vertical plunge, paralleling Dante's descent into Hell, from 'the gardens bright with sinuous rills' to the 'lifeless ocean.' And just as Dante begins his journey at earth's level so it seems only right to begin this analysis at the poem's beginning and proceed downward, as it were, to the 'caves of ice,' the floor of the *Inferno*.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree;
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

Let us think of Xanadu as the whole of Dante's Hell, from the Citadel of Human Reason to the icy, lifeless floor where Satan is fixed; from the pleasure-dome to the

sunless sea. Then, who is our Kubla Khan? Under these circumstances he must be Dante and not Coleridge; Dante, who sought to create from the horrors of Hell a magnificent poem, a creative pleasure-dome. This "pleasure-dome" has several levels of significance. First, it is the totality of the *Inferno*; in the second place, it appears to be the Citadel of Human Reason. Both the Ciardi and the Carlyle-Okey-Wickstead translations offer support.¹

Ciardi's rendering of the Argument for Canto IV states that 'Dante sights a great dome of light, and a voice trumpets through the darkness welcoming Virgil back, for this is the eternal place in Hell.'

And we had not traveled far from where I woke when I made out a radiance
before us that struck away a hemisphere of dark. (IV, 67-69)

The Carlyle-Okey-Wickstead edition cites, in the Argument, 'a hemisphere of light amid the darkness . . .' The pleasure-dome? An extension of Coleridge's own conception of images appearing as things? Or perhaps a combination of the two.

In 'Alph, the sacred river' we have the first of two composite images. Alph may then be called by another name. Acheron-Styx-Phlegethon-Lethe.

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

The Dantean landscape begins to emerge. Perhaps I go a little too far afield in relating 'twice five miles' (words known to have been read by Coleridge in Purchas' *Pilgrimage*) to the Dantean episode but even if this is one example of that literary coincidence mentioned earlier, it is interesting within the framework of my assumptions. The number symbolism in Dante's age was common; and, as Ciardi explains in his introduction to *The Inferno*, 'not as today comical abracadabra but a serious and even sacred matter.' Twice five miles is ten miles, and the number ten was of special significance to Dante and his Catholic world. Ciardi, continuing, states: 'Each part [of *The Divine Comedy*] moreover is the expression of one Person of the Trinity . . . Each part . . . contains 33 cantos for a total of 99. If we add the first introductory canto we obtain a grand total of 100, which is the square of 10; 10 is the perfect number, for it is composed solely of the square of the Trinity plus 1 which represents the Unity of God.'

With walls and towers girdled round we are presented with two interpretive possibilities, one of which is less acceptable to me than the other simply because it would appear out of order, and the fragment has a very specific structural order. In this view Coleridge might have been making his subliminal references to Dis, Dante's capitol city in Hell, described by the poet who sees

. . . the glow of its red mosques, as if they came hot from the forge to
smoulder in this valley. (VIII, 64-65)

and thinks:

... Its wall seemed made of iron and towered above us in our little boat.
(VIII, 74-75)

However, taking into account the natural progression, more likely the 'walls and towers' which enclose the 'twice five miles of fertile ground' constitute the boundaries of the Citadel of Human Reason which Dante says, in Canto IV, was 'circled by seven towering battlements/and by a sweet brook flowing round them all.'

If this is, in fact, the case, the 'fertile ground' encompassed by these battlements is the substance of an intellectual fertility, of the growth of wisdom, the home of Virgil, Homer, Lucan, Ovid, Horace, and the rest.

Within these walls, says Coleridge:

... 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*.

The 'sinuous rills' image has, for me, always brought to mind the human brain with its intricate convolutions, man's own citadel of reason. 'Blossomed,' 'bright' and 'sunny' convey the idea of the light of knowledge; the 'incense-bearing tree' which grows as part of the 'forests ancient' is one of the singular intellectual forces which stands separately and yet as an indivisible part of the whole of ancient learning.

Dante crosses the moat encircling the walls and towers of the Citadel and then:

Through seven gates I entered with those sages and came to a *green meadow blooming round*.

There with a solemn and majestic poise stood many people gathered in the *light* speaking infrequently and with muted voice.

Past that enameled green we six withdrew into a *luminous* and open height from which each soul among them stood in view.

And there directly before me on the green the master soul of time were shown to me. I glory in the glory I have seen. (IV, 110-20)

He leaves this stronghold of reason

... by another road out of that serenity to the roar and trembling air of Hell. I pass from that light into the Kingdom of eternal night. (IV, 152-55)

The shift is rapid from the serenity of Limbo to the immediate horrors of the Second Circle, the beginning of the formal descent. In the same way, Coleridge leaves the 'sunny spots of greenery' with a rather abrupt:

But O, that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!

A savage place ...

At this point Coleridge, too, passes into the depths of the Inferno, down the 'chasm' and into the 'savage place.' This is a place

... as holy and enchanted
As ever beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover.

Several figures are striking here. Dante begins his journey just prior to daybreak on Good Friday of 1300 and emerges from Hell at daybreak of Easter Sunday. Astronomical-astrological positions were of great importance in Dante's age and Ciardi notes that the moon was full. The fullness of the moon may not be especially noteworthy here but any moon will wane at dawn and dawn is the setting for both the beginning and the end of the *Inferno*.

The image of a 'woman wailing for her demon-lover' offers three opportunities for diagnosis. The first of these leads inevitably to Beatrice, Dante's perfect love, his Divine love, the poetic incarnation of his involvement with Beatrice Portinari. For Coleridge, Dante-Kubla is both demon and lover (his hyphenation of the words implies joint qualities). He is lover ipso facto; he is demon because he has entered into Hell, notwithstanding the fact that he does so as an observer. He has been exposed to the agents of sin and to the *demons* who guard them. In a manner of speaking, Dante guards or preserves the Inferno in his poem and becomes, therefore, a demon in that sense.

The second avenue of approach is more internal, more simile than factual precision. The woman is Francesca and she wails for her demon-lover Paolo although he is swept along right by her side. Here, in Canto V, Dante presents the one tender treatment of sinners in Hell; because Paolo and Francesca are unique in all the *Inferno*, there is about them that much more of a haunting quality, about their carnal but not so horrendous sin.

The third opportunity is particularly intriguing since it involves an interesting linking together of additional residual images in Coleridge's mind. That he was a tireless reader is legend. He said himself that he had read everything. There is then strong reason to believe that must have included a Medieval ballad, "The Demon Lover." There are images here which worked to influence both "The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" but those affecting "Kubla Khan" did so by virtue of the *Inferno*.

The story told in the ballad is a simple one. A long lost lover returns to find his love is now someone else's wife and the mother of several children. He claims, tearfully, that he 'might hae had a king's daughter' had he not come back for her. She agrees to leave her husband and children and to go with him. He tells her:

I hae seven ships upon the sea—
The eighth brought me to land—
With four-and-twenty bold mariners,
and music on every hand

She bids farewell to her children and then:

She set her foot upon the ship,
No mariners could she behold.

This same awesome ghostliness echoes in "The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner" but more Dantesque imagery fills the last five stanzas, imagery easily recognizable in "Kubla Khan."

They had not sailed a league, a league
A league but barely three
Until she espied his *cloven foot*
and she wept right bitterlie
'O hold your tongue of your weeping,' says he
'Of your weeping now let me be;
I will shew you how the lilies grow
On the banks of *Italy*.'

'O, what hills are yon, yon pleasant hills,
That the sun shines sweetly on?'
'O yon are the hills of heaven,' he said,
'Where you will never win.'

'O whaten a *mountain* is yon,' she said,
'All so dreary wi frost and snow?'
'O yon is the *mountain of hell*,' he cried,
'Where you and I will go!'

The ballad, "The Demon Lover," left a profound mark on Coleridge's memory; so much so that at just the proper moment it both triggered and crystallized a series of images that joined with those already encouraged by the *Inferno* to help considerably the architecture of the fragment.

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething
.....

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced
Amid whose swift half-intermitted bursts
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail

There can be little argument with the aptness of 'ceaseless turmoil' as a description of the terror which eternally 'seethes' from the bowels of The Infernal Pit. The mighty fountain is Coleridge's acknowledgement of Bruce's fountains of the Nile; but the fact that it hurls up fragments 'like rebounding hail' is worthy of comment. The fragments are, in fact, hail, great chunks of ice jetting up from the frozen bottom of this Hell.

And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

What has caused this unexpected upheaval, the apparent surge of natural violence? What, in Dante's poem, stimulated in Coleridge this series of volcanic images? In Canto IX Virgil and Dante are prohibited from passing through the gates of Dis by the Rebellious Angels. They know that only divine aid can save them. That divine assistance comes in the form of a Heavenly Messenger and his coming is preceded by:

... a squall of terrible sound
that sent a *tremor* through both shores of Hell;
a sound as if two continents of air,
one frigid and one scorching, clashed head on
in a war of winds that stripped the forests bare,
ripped off whole boughs and blew them helter skelter
along the range of dust it raised before it

(IX, 62-68)

Such a *squall* and *tremor* might very well, in Coleridge's mind, have hurled the rivers of Hell, the 'sacred river' composite, upwards for the moment, before returning to its natural course to the 'lifeless ocean.' The 'lifeless ocean' is the second composite image in the poem and amalgamates all the several rounds of the Ninth Circle (Cocytus) of Hell; its best illustration is Round Four (Judecca)

... where souls of the last class
... were covered wholly;
they shone below the ice like straws in glass.
Some lie stretched out; others are fixed in place
upright, some on their heads, some on their soles;
another, like a bow, bends foot to face.

(XXXIV, 10-15)

* * * * *

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

Kubla Khan had his successful wars with Japan; Coleridge suffered his own brand of mental warfare eventually which he seems to have anticipated in the fragment. But it is Dante-Kubla with whom we must be concerned here and he proves no exception to the rule of prophesied war. On four occasions, Dante is given glimpses of the future by sinners he confronts in Hell, political foretellings which are themselves part of a repeating pattern in the *Inferno*.

The first of these 'ancestral voices belongs to Ciaccio The Hog, a Florentine like Dante, and is heard in Canto VI (Circle Three—Gluttons):

And he then: 'After many words were given and taken
it shall come to blood: White shall rise over Black²
and rout the dark lord's force, battered and shaken.

Then it shall come to pass within three suns
that the fallen shall arise, and by the power
of one now gripped by many hesitations

Black shall ride on White for many years,
loading it down with burdens and oppressions
and humbling of proud names and helpless tears.

(VI, 61-69)

In Canto X the spirit of Farinata Degli Uberti, the Ghibelline warrior, speaks to Dante and forecasts his banishment from Florence:

But the face of her who reigns in Hell shall not
be fifty times rekindled in its course
before you learn what griefs attend that art.

(X, 79-81)

Ancestral voices continue to prophesy war in Canto XV where the soul of Dante's teacher, Ser Brunetto Latino, anticipates his ostracism from Florence at the hands of both Black and White Guelphs:

It is written in your stars, and will come to pass,
that your honors shall make both sides hunger for you.

(XV, 71-72)

Circle Eight, the residence of The Thieves, is the setting for the fourth prediction, uttered by Vanni Fucci:

First Pistoia is emptied of the Black
then Florence changes her party and her laws.
From Valdimagra the God of War brings back
a fiery vapor wrapped in turbid air:
then in a storm of battle Piceno
the vapor breaks apart the mist, and there
every White shall feel his wounds anew.
And I have told you this that it may grieve you.

(XXIV, 142-9)

* * * * *

The six lines of verse which seem to separate the two major divisions of the fragment symbolize, for one thing, that thin line between the conscious and the subconscious mind, that point where intuition and reason come together.

In terms of Dante-Coleridge-Kubla, these same lines do represent the cleavage between Upper and Lower Hell. In this instance, the waves on which the 'shadow of the dome of pleasure floated midway . . .' would be those which roll on the river called Styx, engendered by the stroke of Phlegyas' oar. At this stage of his reflection, Coleridge would be inclined to perceive the panoramic wonder of Dante's

work and of Hell itself. He would see both the *Inferno* and the geographic Hell as 'a miracle of rare device/a sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!', a place of such remarkable disgust, crowned as it is with the ministers of consummate wisdom.

Lines 36 through 46 in "Kubla Khan" threaten to leave a monstrous gap in the Dante-Coleridge theory but scholarship must often allow for the indefensible in order to avoid becoming merely avaricious and pedantic. It would be foolish to think of any portion of the fragment as essentially meaningless, and without some substantial source culled from Coleridge's vast reading. Dante is not, nor do I claim him to be, the sole contributor to the genesis of the fragment. There are aspects of the poem which are unexplainable or at best only vaguely supported by the theory under investigation here. (This fact should not, however, obviate what is valid.) Guesswork can be dangerous; but, nonetheless, it is too often tempting, too often within the reach of mental fingers which generate intellectual scratchings. The ten lines of verse in question are tempting in just this way. Who is the 'damsel with the dulcimer'? The most obvious guess would be Beatrice. Obvious, perhaps, but without proof. The lady plays a dulcimer. There is no mention of such an instrument in *The Divine Comedy*. It is listed casually in Daniel iii, 10; in that same book Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego face the ordeal of a fiery furnace, just as Dante faces the ordeal of a fiery furnace. Total assimilation by Coleridge of assorted, scattered images? Examples of literary coincidence? Even if it should be the latter, speculation is warranted and justified. Her Abyssinian heritage is derived most likely from Coleridge's reading of Bruce's *Travels To Discover The Source Of The Nile* since Tana Lake in Northeastern Abyssinia is the accepted source of the Blue Nile. Lowes credits Milton as the source of Coleridge's 'Mount Abora'; there does not seem to be any evidence, unfortunately, that Abora is Purgatory with a musical Beatrice playing strains to guide her lover to Salvation.

It is the Abyssinian maid's song that Coleridge wishes to emulate according to his own declaration. He longs 'to build that dome in air/That sunny dome! those caves of ice!' What Coleridge wishes to emulate is the *Inferno* itself, the work of art, with the majesty, power, human dignity, and human desperation implicit and explicit in Dante's gargantuan effort.

The parallel is about to unify in the major symbol of the *Inferno*. But there is need for some reading between the lines and a modicum of grammatical analysis.

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.

The crux of the argument lies within this stanza but first there must be some rearrangement. Generally, the first three lines of the stanza are taken to be a complete sentence which states, in essence, that those who see the caves of ice and the sunny dome in Coleridge's poetic fragment, the spirit of his artistic output, should beware of the poet himself for he must be mad to have attempted such a synthesis of the unreal into the real. In order to comply with this Coleridge-Dante experiment, it is necessary to conclude the sentence after the first two lines:

And all who heard should see *them* there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

This then assumes that 'them' refers to something or someone other than the caves of ice and the dome. (This, in turn, suggests that a thought or a series of thoughts were, perhaps, lost along the way and not recorded in the fragment.) What or who is the something or someone? The entire range of sinners encountered by Dante on his satanic pilgrimage! And the gist of the recast sentence is that potential sinners, given the opportunity to see punishments meted out to transgressors through Dante's words would take great precautions ('Beware!') in avoiding the pitfalls of crime, misjudgement, and unhealthy appetite.

An interesting effect is now seen with the next two lines. They, too, form a complete thought:

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,

But, again, whose eyes and hair are involved here? The answer to that question crystallizes the entire Dante-Coleridge theory; the eyes and hair belong to Satan, the fundamental symbolic thread running throughout the *Inferno*.

We have arrived at the end of the downward motion of the fragment; at the bottom floor of Hell where Satan stands fixed in the ice of the 'sunless sea.' His eyes flash, his hair floats as a madman's, but the picture is not finished. There is an exclamation point after 'hair' but it is there not to end the sentence but to add emphasis to the image of the eyes and hair. It is located in the middle of a sentence which then says that the eyes and hair 'weave a circle round him thrice.' Look now at Dante's description of Satan in Canto XXXIV:

With what a sense of awe I saw his head
towering above me! for it had *three faces*:
one was in front, and it was fiery red;

The other two, as weirdly wonderful
merged with it from the middle of each shoulder
to the point where *all converged* at the top of the skull;

the right was something between white and bile;
the left was about the color that one finds
on those who live along the banks of the Nile.

.....
He wept from his six eyes, and down three chins
the tears ran mixed with bloody froth and pus.

In every mouth he worked a broken sinner
between his rake-like teeth . . .

(XXXIV, 37-45, 53-56)

Six eyes, three faces, all met in one hairy skull! Woven in a circle, repeating a facial pattern three times! A ghastly sight, without doubt, and one guaranteed to 'close your eyes with holy dread'; but what must devastate the reader-viewer even more is the fact that this embodiment of evil had at one time 'drunk the milk of *Paradise*'. The *Paradiso* is Dante's picture of Heaven and it was from Heaven that Satan fell.

The miraculous thing about the poetic evolution is that so many accurate, soundly structures idea-pictures can emerge clothed in other seemingly unrelated idea-pictures, without the poet's conscious knowledge or determination. With respect to the Dante-Coleridge hypothesis, the assessment of "Kubla Khan" as merely a fragment is questionable. There is, in this case, a totality, an integrity that seems to assure to Coleridge the achievement of a goal. In his own manner, he has built his pleasure-dome; he has created a work comparable to that which he was striving to emulate. And he has preserved the moral judgement applied by Dante: that all of mankind is susceptible to falls from grace, divine or otherwise, and that recognition of sin is one means of avoiding its complications, thus realizing moral salvation. Of greatest value here, however, is the marriage of creative spirits, a union of genius with genius spanning five centuries.

I have attempted to show more than just an interesting parallel structure in two great poems. The bond between the *Inferno* and "Kubla Khan" is significant; the bond between Dante and Coleridge is momentous. It seems safe to say that throughout the fragment Coleridge has been citing Dante as the creative prototype, the master poet. A cardinal point is that, in so doing, Coleridge succeeded in making room for himself on the same pedestal.

NOTES

- ¹ Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from *The Inferno* are from the Ciardi translation.
- ² Reference is made to the White and Black Guelphs, once united against the opposing political party, the Ghibellines, then split in bloody civil strife in Florence.