

TWENTY YEARS LATER: STILL WALKING TO XANADU

The Road to Xanadu by now, at least as far as the extant literature is concerned, has become «measureless to man» (though J. L. Lowes' very learned and plausible reconstruction of Coleridge's creative process in «Kubla Khan» is still unsurpassed). And «measureless» seems to be the key word. Every time I pull «Kubla Khan» out of the hat in classroom discussions of the Romantic Era, the poem defies in some aspect or another the yardsticks of criticism.

As a third-semester student some 20 years ago, I wrote the following brief analysis of «Kubla Khan»:

By indicating an interval after the eleventh, thirtieth, and thirty-sixth line, Coleridge himself suggests that the poem has to be looked upon as consisting of four parts. Moreover these four parts differ from each other in meter, rhythm, rhyme, vocabulary, etc.

Part I opens with a situation known from quite a few romantic ballads: a foreign sovereign orders a pleasure-mansion to be built for himself in a thoroughly Elysian landscape. This beautiful garden constructed for the sovereign's diversion and amusement is situated close to a holy river. There is an antithesis between the light, sweet and artificial nature of the garden and the imposing, mighty and divine nature of the river. The greatness and eternity of these sacred environments are hinted at through the use of the «caverns» as a picture: their shape reminds me of the eternal arches of the sky. The letter «m» in the alliterative expression «measureless to man» signifies greatness and the hissing «s» in «sunless sea» danger and gloom. Thus the situation of a conflict is given: man with his desire for diversion intrudes on divine nature. Formally seen, this first part has no fixed rhyme-scheme, but the whole stanza —if I may call it so— is bound together by means of the «b» rhyme (decree—see—tree—greenery).

Part II. Three excited exclamations, the lines connected by enjambements, prepare the reader for the reaction of the divine: the explosion, which is described in five imposing, mighty couplets, interspersed with many «heavy» words of Latin origin. Rather puzzling, I find, are the last two lines of this stanza. They are not alluded to in the following parts of the poem; perhaps they only serve to underline the element of unlimited time, eternity (ancestral voices) or to round out these first two parts by mentioning again Kubla Khan's name, with which Part I commenced. On the other hand, the whole poem is only a fragment. This could account for the fact that these two lines do not seem to be connected with other parts of the poem.

Part III. Now the rhythm becomes lighter again. Coleridge uses, very adequately for the contents of this stanza, the second half of a sonnet to render clearly that the uproar of the elements does not —as one would expect— result in catastrophe and disaster, but in a wonderful synthesis of the paradise upon earth, created by man

«the sunny pleasure-dome» and the genuine, great, immeasurable divine nature, the «caves of ice». This is a perfect union between two elements that actually exclude each other: fire and water, or perhaps rather: human spirit and Lethe.

In *Part IV* the meter and the system of rhyme are changed once more (this last part is a song). The meter and the girl playing on a dulcimer and singing to it suggest that. Now, the author connects his own personality with the three previous parts of the poem, giving them thus an entirely new meaning. He himself wants to create such a perfect union between the divine and the human. Through many exclamations and the use of very simple words (almost none of Latin origin) he shows that he is emotionally very involved. If we look upon this last part and at the same time at the first, it becomes clear that his highest aim is to unite the above-mentioned divine and human features in his poetry. Thus he alludes in the first stanza to Alphaeus, the river of the Muses and of poetical imagination. In contrast to this rather shapeless, ever-moving river, floating through measureless and incomprehensible great nature have to be seen the exact measurements of the garden («twice five miles», «with walls and towers girdled round», «sinuous rills», «enfolding sunny spots»). In other words, it is the task of the poet to confine the immeasurable, divine, in words, rhythmical lines, rhymes, stanzas and poems. But if he is able to do that, he emerges out of the common crowd of human beings and moves as a kind of demigod between man and divine powers.

On the whole, the poem reminds me strongly of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, the demigod who made man from clay, stole fire from Olympus and taught men the use of it. Finally he was punished for his hubris and chained by Zeus to a rock in the Caucasus. The normal human spirit is incomplete and full of faults. Therefore it must be the true ambition of every poetical genius to rise above man and to obtain from heaven the touch of perfection which alone makes his work timeless and everlasting and transfers it into a valuable gift for man. So far, I think, the story of Prometheus is in harmony with the intentions of this poem, but how about the necessarily resulting discrepancy between this human ambition and the indifferent and grim divine powers? Is it as fatal to the poetic genius as it was to Prometheus? The poem does not provide a direct answer to this question. But on the other hand, does not the description of the poet as a demigod in the last stanza suggest terrible punishment? The poet is not human; human beings look upon him with awe and fear him like a god. Thus he is in a way excluded from partaking in human life. Nor is the poet a god. The use of past tense in the last two lines of the poem make it obvious that he is not permanently one of the divine powers. Perhaps one could say that this dreadful isolation between two different worlds is a kind of punishment for him. Coleridge himself would certainly have had reasons enough to assent to that.

Reading this today, some of the remarks appear to be on the pedestrian side, to stay with the metaphor, but to most of it I'd still subscribe. Two years later, a bit brasher and a few books hence, I added a few paragraphs, exploring a slightly different angle, namely «Kubla Khan» as a representation of the new (romantic) movement in poetry, a kind of declaration of independence:

The field of poetic endeavor and achievement is made up by twice five miles of fertile ground, encompassing beauty, perfection, everything of lasting value which human beings strive for. The field is surrounded by strong walls and towers of conservatism. The deep romantic chasm —and it is amazing that Coleridge actually would use the word «romantic» here— is the fountain from which the romantic

poets draw their inspiration, their intuition. Three adjectives, savage, holy and enchanted, describe the place as an abode of passion and of the supernatural.

The turmoil is the turmoil of romantic creativity and is the source of the river of romantic poetry flowing along the twisted, meandering course of this new poetic movement. The river then reaches to caverns of the human brain, i.e., of human reasoning and wisdom and causes a tumult of protest, of criticism, by the reactionaries by the time it meets a lifeless ocean of incomprehension and stupidity. This is 1798. The measured structure of eighteenth-century poetry, the geometrical French flower garden, whose building had been decreed (note the pejorative implications of a decree and the ludicrous aspects if applied to poetry) is still with us. The geometry is formally beautiful, but contrived and devoid of life and emotion. This poetry was a form of art, designed for human enjoyment, yet without a message, earthbound. This tradition casts a shadow over the river of new romanticism, but it is too powerless, too weak to obstruct its course. The fountain of originality, of inspiration in the romantic chasm, will always feed this new river and urge it on. Whether the caves approve, whether they resound with the new poetry is immaterial. This new poetry follows different standards and is, perhaps, immeasurable.

And the poet? The natural social reaction is to ostracize him or worse. Fear of the new, of the unknown leads to hostility. His Muse could not prevent that, although it seems that she procured for him eternal life and allowed the new tradition to live on for more than two centuries.

Again, these lines too, still seem reasonable to me. Then I must have become wiser, or I started *Beowulf*. In any case, there are no further yellowed notes. Lately, when I re-read the poems, I'm preoccupied by the sound pattern. For many years I have lectured students on the dangers of separating content and form in poetry, telling them that content and form interact like the cog-wheels of complicated machinery. Now I'm not so sure that in «Kubla Khan» in particular and in the ballad in general the form, especially the sound, does not really lead a life of its own like the tune of a song which makes perfect sense without the lyrics.

Or, I wonder whether the woman waits for her demon lover beneath a waning moon by gloomy necessity or by the innate need for alliteration (not that both goals are mutually exclusive), Kipling found all the «magic», the «vision» in these two lines. Could the magic, at least partially, have been wrought by conscious or subconscious word associations? Unfortunately, Kipling does not specify exactly what the «vision» is nor how it relates to the rest of the poem. For me the vision is contained to some degree, as in Goethe's «Erlkönig» in the otherworldliness of the situation, but far more in the conjuring, enchanting quality of the sound, the rhyme and the rhythm. I consider myself *bergtatt* (i.e., in Norwegian mythology, abducted into the magic mountain) by these elements rather than by rationalized imagery, and the damsel with a dulcimer would have to agree. Though, if she did, she would undo my point.

«Kubla Khan» is a fragment, actually four rather disjointed fragments. But the

entire poem appears on the printed page strangely unified like an Egyptian mummy in profile. For many generations students and scholars have been unwrapping it, hoping to find the golden face mask under immeasurable layers of bandages. The magic of the poem might well consist in the fact that this is a Sisyphus-task, but that each attempt at unwrapping yields a golden mask.

So, let's keep walking on to Xanadu; Coleridge is right behind.

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