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Creation, Imagination and Metapoetry in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Paradigmatic Poem "Kubla Khan"

Kubla Khan is one of the best-known works by the English romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Many interpretations of the poem are possible, different critics have expressed completely different opinions about the message of the work in the past more than 200 years. The aim of the present essay is to approach the poem from one of the numerous points of view, within the framework of an in-depth analysis

One of the possible interpretations is to view Kubla Khan as metapoetry; that is, poetry written about poetry itself, and in a broader interpretation, maybe about art in general and about the creative power of human mind. But before we attempt to explore in detail what motifs seem to support the view that that the poem is a kind of meta-poetic, artistic self-confession, it is worth having a glance at the circumstances under which the work was written, and what comments the author himself later added to it. Henceforth we attempt to summarize what biographical motivations played a role in the creation of the poem, before we start the in-depth analysis and the exploration of the motifs referring to the meta-poetic and meta-artistic character of the work, and what modes of creation are outlined in it.

Possible Biographical Motivations

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his poem entitled Kubla Khan in the autumn of 1797, allegedly in a farmhouse near Exmoor, but since it was published only in 1816, it is probable that the author revised it several times before publication. Coleridge himself claimed that the poem was inspired by and

opium-induced dream, as it is implied in the secondary title of the poem: A Vision in a Dream. Furthermore, it is also supposed that the imagery of the poem is partly inspired by Marco Polo's reports about his journey to China and the description of the area called "Shangdu" (which is identical with the poem's spot called Xanadu), where Mongolian ruler Kubla Khan really used to have a summer palace in the 13th century. The description by Marco Polo was included in Samuel Purchas's book titled Pilgrimage (Vol. XI, 231).

As Coleridge himself writes in his note to the poem:

"In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas's Pilgrimage..."

Since the poet himself commented on the composition of the work, it is really probable that he wrote, or at least started to write it under the influence of drugs, or the vision described in the poem was originally really caused by intoxication.

Although Coleridge commented on his own poem after it had been published, as mentioned above, he himself gave no explicit interpretation of the message of the work. That is why the poem is debated by many critics, whether it is just simply visionary poetry without any kind of previously planned message, just to cause aesthetic pleasure to the reader, or although the author himself left no kind of explicit interpretation, there was an underlying conception behind the creation of the mysterious lines, and there is really a very well-developed message under the surface.

Henceforth, as mentioned above, after having a glance at the circumstances under which the work was supposedly composed, we will make an attempt to interpret the poem as a meta-poetic work, a poetic interpretation of poetry, art, and the mission of the poet himself.

A Possible Interpretation of the Poem

The poem is divided into three paragraphs by the author. It starts with the description of a wonderful palace built by Mongolian and Chinese ruler Kubla Khan in Xanadu, a really existing geographical area situated in China. However strange it sounds, a loose historical background is observable behind the dream-like vision set into poetry, since the Khan was a real historical personality, and the palace described in the overture of the poem really existed in some form. Outside the visionary palace a holy river, the Alph is flowing

into the dark, “sunless sea”, as Coleridge writes. Then the poem continues with the description of the “fertile grounds” near the palace, and it also turns out that the building is surrounded by ancient forests and hills. To sum it up, the first paragraph describes a historical, but at the same time seemingly supernatural and mythical, majestic world, dominated by Kubla Khan and his “pleasure dome”. This world seems to be a static picture where everything is unchanged, like a timeless, painting-like place, where the dimension of time does not exist, or at least it cannot be observed, a kind of empire of eternity. It must be mentioned that in the first paragraph the poetic speaker describes the sight as a spectator from outside, he is not an active character, is not present in the world where the dream-like settings exist.

However, in the second paragraph of the poem a drastic, dramatic change of view can be observed:

*“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 !”*

The paragraph directly starts with a conjunction “but” and an exclamation, introducing the contrast immediately. Something suddenly happens, while in the first paragraph a kind of static description was dominant, something suddenly and drastically changes in the whole landscape. The place near the palace is depicted as a “savage place”, as if a completely different world coexisted in the same dimension. The speaker talks about a hell-like, mysterious and ominous environment, which is beyond the boundaries of the area that is dominated by Kubla and his “pleasure dome”. Pagan, supernatural forces appear in the poem, breaking out from the depth, disturbing the idyll of the world depicted in the first paragraph. A source of a fountain is described that feeds a river. The river floods through trees and rocks, and it finally inundates Kubla’s gardens. As the last lines of the second paragraph describe:

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

That is, as the water inundates Kubla Khan’s wonderful domain, the ruler hears voices, “ancestral voices”, supposedly the voice of the spirits of his ancestors who remind him that the flood is just the prognostication, and he will soon have to face war against something or someone. To sum it up, the second paragraph is in contrast to the first, in which the destruction, the

annihilation of the idyllic and seemingly perfect land described by the first paragraph is outlined. However perfect and visionary the domain of Kubla Khan was, it was destroyed by a flood, probably motivated by mysterious, supernatural forces that might have been envious of the Khan's power, as he was a mortal human, despite all that he had possessed and achieved, he could not reach as much power as certain supernatural forces, maybe gods who finally punished him for having wanted too much.

In addition, the second verse paragraph is interesting to analyse because it is about destruction, undoubtedly, but at the same time a certain form of creation also occurs. Strong sexual symbolism can also be observed within the lines of the second paragraph. The whole brutal and violent landscape and scene may refer to one certain mode of creation, to biological propagation, the most elementary, and perhaps at the same time most primordial creative power of human beings that does not demand intellect or superhuman talent at all. That is, it might be stated that the first two paragraphs of the poem contrast the divine, supernatural, special nature of creation with its primordial, elemental and primitive form. It can be viewed as a typical contrast of romantic poetry: the contrast of soul and body, mind and sexual desires. Both of them are able to create or destroy, it only depends on human beings how they decide and how they use these forms of creation or destruction.

In the third, last verse paragraph the speaker continues to describe what happened after the palace was destroyed by the flood.

*“The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves ;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice !”*

That is, the shadow of the dome was reflected by the water, and in vain had it been destroyed, a wonderful sight emerged from the water, and in some form the palace (and possibly the ruler himself) re-created itself (and himself) in another dimension of existence.

Finally, suddenly the poetic speaker shifts into first person singular, starts to narrate in a much more personal voice, appears as not a simple narrator, but as a kind of character in the poem. “In a vision once I saw...”, that is, the poetic speaker himself acknowledges in a way that all that he described in the first two paragraphs was a kind of poetic vision, as was the “Abyssinian maid” playing a dulcimer mentioned in the further lines of the poem. He claims that if he had the capability of recalling the music played by the mysterious maid,

than he would be able to reconstruct Kubla Khan's visionary palace from mere music, and he would be able to become as enormous and powerful as Kubla Khan himself. As written in the very last lines of the poem:

*“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.”*

It is described how powerful and fearful the poetic speaker himself would become if he was able to reconstruct the palace and gain the power of Kubla Khan. A possible interpretation is that he could even become one with Kubla Khan in some kind of supernatural, timeless dimension, he himself could become the mythical ruler.

To sum it up, we may state that the third mode of creation outlined in the third paragraph is the creative power of memory, the power via which things lost in the past can be re-created, if we are strong enough to recall them, and something that no longer exists in a physical form can come into existence once again within the human mind, if we dare to believe that we are able to create by the mere power of our imagination.

Concluding Remarks – Meta-poetry in the Poem

The poetic speaker himself could become much more than he is in mortal, human reality, and if we attempt to interpret the poem as a kind of meta-poetry, a work about the creative power of poets, we might even risk the statement that Samuel Taylor Coleridge (and all other great poets in his world view) are all Kubla Khans, who have the power to create and dominate within the world of the imagination. Since the poem itself is a mixture of dream and vision, as the author himself claimed, everything is possible in the world described in it. Although Kubla Khan is the powerful ruler of a seemingly perfect and dream-like world, he has to face the destruction of his domain, but somehow all of it resurrects in a new form. Poets, who are all creators and rulers of their own imaginary worlds, may have to face the destruction of what is important to them. But on the other hand, if they are real artist, they have the power the re-create their own worlds, their own works of art, even if they are destroyed time by time. But no matter how many times one's imaginary world is destroyed, the eternal power of art is somehow outside the dimension

of time, and poets must be able to possess this kind of power. The destruction of Kubla Khan's palace and the flood can also be interpreted as the destructive power of time that shows no mercy towards anything mortal. But since the Khan / the poet (?) is a man of exceptional artistic abilities, he has the power and the courage to fight against time and resurrect from total destruction and finally reach a kind of eternity via his creative power and works of art.

Since the search for eternity and cult of geniuses were amongst the key characteristics of the period of the Romantics, Coleridge's famous poem may be treated as a kind of romantic guideline to poets, a meta-poetic work that reminds artists that eternity can be reached if they are talented and brave enough to fight against the destructive power of time and human mortality, not merely as a vision-dream-like poem that perhaps causes aesthetic pleasure to the all-time reader, but its real message is hard or even impossible to decode.