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"Kubla Khan," the Mirror of Otherness

The portrayal of the Orient in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is rather complex due to the multi-layered framing that Coleridge intricately devised for the poem. To evaluate its representation of the Orient, therefore, requires readers to work through the narrative structure of the poem. Besides the preface that informs readers how "the Author" composed no less than "two to three hundred lines" after reading about Kubla Kahn in his opium-induced dream, even in the actual poem itself, which is but an incomplete restoration of the original poem, there is the inspired poet, the "lyrical I" relating to his audience his poetic genius that surpasses Kubla Khan's imperial power. Consequently, the depiction of the oriental monarch is in turn shaped by the inspired poet in the poem and Coleridge, the author of the poem. This laying bare of the process by which the Orient is whimsically imagined or mythicized by western mind reduces the credibility of this westernized version of the East and instead shifts the emphasis to the working mind of the poet. Hence, the oriental "otherness" in the poem is not so much an appropriation of the East to consolidate Western dominion and authority, which is what Edward Said calls "Orientalism," than a vehicle by which the poet gives voice to his imagination and creative power.

Indeed, Kubla Khan is romanticized as an oriental tyrant wielding his secular power to build his palace and garden in a "savage place," which is a stereotypical understanding of the oriental empire and civilization. However, Coleridge does not shrink from acknowledging his anglicized vision of the Orient. The preface explicitly states that the vision of Kubla Khan is

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the poet's dream produced by opium in the English countryside, and it even disclaims that the poem is merely "a psychological curiosity," in doing so excusing Coleridge's personal, and potentially false or limited, imagination of the Orient.

Moreover, the vision of Kubla Khan, far from an ironized oriental object, serves as a model, or more precisely, a mirror of ideal composition to Coleridge, to his inspired self in the dream, and to the inspired poet within the poem, who thereby recognizes his more potent poetic power that can create "miracle of rare device." The preface describes the ideal mode of composition that Coleridge encounters in his dream: "if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort" (464). The immediate correspondence between things, images, and expressions produces the authenticity or "fidelity" of idealized representation. We later find in the poem that Kubla Khan also wields the power to assign his intended "expressions" to the conjured "images" and the perceived "things": he can "decree" a pleasure-dome to be built without any exertion or effort of his own. Kubla Khan, as a symbol of power, then represents the potency to put ideas into realization.

Nevertheless, in the sublime natural landscape, or rather the dreamscape that is "holy," "enchanted," and "haunted," Kubla Khan's secular power to give order to nature can only strive "in turmoil"; his status, which is the source of his power, is menaced by the superior demigod, the "demon-lover," and his earthly accomplishments are threatened by the war prophesied by the ancestral voices. It is then that the inspired poet, enlightened by the Abyssinian maid, takes control of the narrative, and demonstrates his creative power. He claims to build a miraculous dome with caves of ice in air, which surpasses the pleasure-dome that Kubla Khan decrees to be built on earth. By relating the tale of Kubla Khan, the poet discovers from the earthly power of the emperor a stronger power of his own, that is, his

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poetic genius. With Kubla Khan as a mirror, the poet finds the potency of poetry as a channel to the higher truth of paradise.

Tim Fulford argues that Orientalism in "Kubla Khan" provides the poet with the material out of which he constructs a story about his own creative power. He indicates that "Coleridge depicts his poem . . . as a kind of magic mirror in which the dreaming poet, half believing in the reality of the Orient he dreams . . . discovers what kind of dreamer he is…The Orientalist exterior uncovers an occidental and psychological interior" (Fulford 231). Perhaps this can explain why Coleridge includes in the preface another poem of his own that mentions the water surface reflecting images like a mirror: "And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms / Come trembling back, unite, and now once more / The pool becomes a mirror" (465). It is possible that Coleridge intends to urge the readers to read this conspicuous oriental poem not merely as an exotic legend but as a mirror that reflects the power of poetry which he owns. Therefore, Orientalism in this poem does not serve to estrange the East as an inferior otherness as Said's interpretative strategy suggests, but functions as a mirror that enables him to recognize among the unfamiliar otherness an intrinsic part of himself as a poet.

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Works Cited

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “Kubla Khan.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 10th ed., vol. D, W. W. Norton, 2018, pp. 464-66.

Fulford, Tim. “Coleridge and the Oriental Tale.” *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*, edited by Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 213-234.

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