SPONTANEOUS OVERFLOW

Everybody knows Coleridge's story, in the preface to its publication in 1816, of how he allegedly wrote Kubla Khan, and everyone knows how Professor Livingstone Lowes has shown, in his book The road to Xanadu, how he believes the poem happened.

Personally, I consider Coleridge's story a literary hoax. [1] I cannot believe that Kubla Khan is a fragment, interrupted and unfinished. I believe it to be rather a Romantic manifesto, the poetic equivalent and anticipation of Wordsworth's famous Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads. (The poem was written in November 1797, but not published until 1816.)

The full title of the poem reads : Kubla Khan, or A vision in a dream; A fragment. The alternative title gives us the key to the structure of the poem. The dream occupies the first 36 lines; next follows the vision (the word occurs in line 38); then comes the synthesis of these two in the poem's final statement.

The dream is divided into three sections, which mirror the characteristic shiftings and recurrences of the world of dream.

The first section, of 11 lines, provides the introductory setting. We are in Shang-tu, a province of Tartary. Kubla Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, and Emperor of China in the 13th century, has commanded a stately palace to be built in a splendid landscape of forests and gardens and lawns. All is light and air, beauty and fertility. Except for one dark note. Through the demesne runs a sacred river, which flows under the ground by way of fathomless caves to a sunless sea.

The second section, of 19 lines, traces this river to its source. It bursts from the ground in a deep chasm that slants across the hillside, and it gushes out ceaselessly, throwing up huge fragments of rock. Then it pursues a leisurely course for five miles through the forest and the parkland, until it disappears with a mighty roar into the underground caves; its tumult sounds to the Emperor like the voices of his ancestors, prophesying war.

The third section, of 6 lines, at once recapitulates and focuses : the palace and its setting are presented in a bird's-eye view. But they are also presented as an object of wonder.

The vision then occupies the next 5 lines. It presents a picture of an Abyssinian girl accompanying herself on a musical instrument as she sings.

The final 13 lines then synthesize dream and vision, and offer us a profound statement of the nature of Romantic inspiration and its creative processes.

In interpreting the poetic significance of all this, let us first link Shang-tu with Abyssinia. To Coleridge's Romantic imagination these were both remote and strange places, Wordsworth's "far-off things". They thus unify and harmonize the dream and the vision. Note, too, that there is an echo of The

Solitary Reaper in the picture of the Abyssinian maid: they are both alone and singing, but whereas the Highland girl is performing manual farm labour, this one is practising the art of instrumental music. Wordsworth's concern is to evoke an emotional atmosphere in a setting of simple rural life; Coleridge's is to embody his deepest artistic tenets.

For the sacred river Alph (the epithet is used three times) is an image of the flow of divine inspiration; the unfathomed caves are those of man's artistic potential, and the sunless sea is the mysterious underground reservoir of creative talent. Kubla's demesne is the domain of poetry, a world of colour and light and beauty, within which the poet holds powerful sway, and where, like Kubla, he can erect magnificent and wonderful structures, each "a miracle of rare device".

Part of Coleridge's Romantic creed is that poetry should be evocative, that it should suggest as well as state. Hence "twice five", at once vaguer than "ten" and suggestive of a number greater than this precisely fixed one. Coleridge is also a careful poetic craftsman, a confirmed believer, like Spenser, Keats, and Tennyson, in the poetic importance of sound values and rhythm; hence the subtle interplay of echoes in

> Twice five miles of fertile ground
> With walls and towers were girdled round....
> Five miles meandering with a mazy motion...
> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan...

But to return. The first five lines of the second section go on to image the importance of the imagination in colouring experience; as Wordsworth says, "to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination". Coleridge indicates some of the kinds of subjects that are attractive to the Romantic spirit: a deep romantic chasm, a green hillside, a grove of splendid trees, wild and haunted spots, moonlight, enchantments, a wailing woman, a demon-lover; and that significant phrase "holy and enchanted" forges a verbal link with "sacred" in line 3 and with "holy dread" in line 52. Note also that the evocation of the strange, remote, emotional drama of the world of balladry is an echo of Wordsworth's "old, unhappy, far-off things", as well as being a reminder that the Romantic creed has a long poetic history.

Next, Coleridge takes us to explore the source and the process of poetic inspiration and artistic creation. "All good poetry," writes Wordsworth, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." This is the origin of the poetic impulse; but "our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings". The Lyrical Ballads, he says, were written with a purpose, which is principally "to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement,...to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature." Before long he mentions "one other circumstance which distinguishes these poems from the popular poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and

situation to the feeling." Later he returns to his statement "that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", and continues: "it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on."

It is this process that Coleridge images in lines 17-28. The deep romantic chasm, wild, holy, enchanted, and haunted, images the source of poetic inspiration. The mighty fountain which is constantly forced up from it, seething with ceaseless turmoil, images "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", The huge fragments of dancing rocks that vault and rebound amid the swift half-intermittent burst of the fountain are an image of the ceaseless surge of thoughts, imaginative ideas, and poetic images produced by the poet's emotion, "the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated". As Wordsworth says, "our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts"; "our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement".

But there then follows a time of tranquil contemplation and painstaking workmanship, of selection and arrangement, until the poet achieves the re-creation of his original emotional inspiration in a worthy form as a finished work of art. "He...saw...clearly, and expounded more fully than any English critic before him, the principle of the organic unity of a work of art" (House : Coleridge, p.16). Coleridge himself described the creative process as combining "a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order". The meditative working - out process is imaged in the mazy meandering of the sacred river (note how lines 24 and 26 echo line 3); the re-creation of the emotional inspiration in artistic form as a poem is imaged in the tumultuous sinking of the river underground, echoing the seething turmoil with which it burst forth from the chasm. The lifeless ocean of line 28, echoing the sunless sea of line 5, thus represents the exhaustion of the emotional impulse that created the poem: "all passion spent". And the measureless caverns of lines 4 and 27 are the mysterious underground recesses of the human personality that contain the dark, unplumbable reservoirs of poetic intuition or inspiration. It is not, therefore, surprising that the Kubla-poet is inspired by this emotional turmoil and tumult to hear of "old, unhappy, far-off things, /And battles long ago."

The third section then makes clear the connexion between inspiration and poem. The shadow of the pleasure-dome falls across the sacred river at its midway mark, equally influenced by the fountain and the caves, That is to say, the splendid structure that is the poem depends equally on emotional inspiration and on its shaping by means of poetic craftsmanship; it is the miraculous creation of the complex poetic experience; and the miracle is that the heat and light of poetic artistry are created from the dark and icy depths of the poet's being which he cannot consciously fathom.

What achieves this miracle is made clear in the final section of the poem. It is divine inspiration. The poet is a kind of magician. He has mysterious

creative powers that ordinary mortals cannot understand and are therefore afraid of. They regard him as being possessed by a kind of mad devil, whose mysterious magic they must superstitiously exorcize. With his flashing eyes and his streaming hair, he is like the divinely inspired prophets of old, against whom we ordinary mortals must close our eyes in holy dread, for he has tasted the delights of Paradise, he has communed with the ultimate creative spirit of all things, with the Shelleyan and the Platonic "One".

So supreme, indeed, does Coleridge regard poetry among the arts, that he has made this poem embody the ideals of the others. Poetry, he suggests, can rival the art of the painter, whether in landscapes or portraits (the damsel); it can have the same structural coherence as architecture (the pleasure dome); it can reverberate with tonal, emotional, and imaginative echoes like music (the dulcimer). It is indeed a miracle of rare devising.

Far from being a fragment, then, the poem is a complete and highly-wrought entity, a superb poetic representation of the source, the materials, and the process of artistic creation. It embodies a whole poetic theory and practice in 54 of the most compelling and appealing lines of English poetry. It is an image of Coleridge's poetic Romanticism and artistic creed.

Interrupted by a person from Porlock, indeed!

1. See Walter Jackson Bate : Coleridge (London, 1969), pp. 76-7.

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