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Coleridge's "Kubla Khan": Creation of Genius or Addiction?

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In a 1950s study, an artist injected with a hallucinogen was asked to sketch pictures at various intervals throughout his high. Not only did his behavior deteriorate, but the style of the pictures he completed under the influence was completely different from his normal oeuvre. Although these works could probably still be considered "art," their difference from his "natural" work raises an important question about their value and the genuineness of their authorship ("Acid Trip" 1, 1-9). A similar question might be posed about Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan": it is undoubtedly an excellent poem, but unique in his oeuvre, and created by a very different Coleridge indeed.

Coleridge was a literary genius and a chief Romantic poet and theorist. His most famous poems—"Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "Kubla Khan"—combine an element of fantasy with lyric genius, and have endured for over two centuries, providing testament to the poet's exceptional abilities. "Kubla Khan," arguably his most anthologized poem, however, reflects a vision and style not consistent with Coleridge's other fantastical work. The narrative structure of "Christabel," for example, evokes serenity despite the evil undertones of the poem's best imagery. In "Kubla Kahn," Coleridge conjures and personifies surreal and bizarre imagery that takes precedence over any semblance of narrative structure and actual characterization. Given the

completely uncharacteristic style of this poem compared with his other works, could the depth of his imagination and ability to compose it have been attributable to his admitted use of opium and the profession that the "vision" of "Kubla Khan" came to him during an opium dream? In other words, is "Kubla Khan" a work of genius or the unexpected result of narcotic influence?

Coleridge himself made a distinction between the times he was high and the times he was lucid, calling the first the "*ego nocturnus*" (the night-self), and the second the "*ego diurnus*" (the day-self). He saw his opium experience, the work of his "night-self," as a "psychological curiosity" (*Drugs and Inspiration* 785). It was because of his literary genius that he was able to meld the two by being able to remember part of his opium creativity and articulate and record it. What is not clear is where this experience might fit in Coleridge's doctrine of imagination. In "*Biographia Literaria*," Coleridge wrote of "primary" and "secondary" imagination (202). In general terms, the primary imagination is creativity as it unfolds or occurs; the secondary imagination was the same, but involved conscious development of ideas. While on opium, it could be said that Coleridge experienced a "tertiary" imagination: one that reached beyond the "naturally" occurring spontaneous creativity of the primary imagination and the more controlled creativity of the secondary imagination. It enabled him to go further than the creative confines with which he was familiar, thereby opening a third level of imagination, from which "Kubla Khan" emerged. It is interesting to note that according to Coleridge, there was more to his poem than we now have. Immediately upon waking from his opium dream, Coleridge began writing down the text that had appeared to him, but he was called from the room to attend to business and upon his return an hour later, his recollections of the dream-text had vanished, and he was unable to proceed beyond what was already on paper (181).

The result of Coleridge's interaction with opium is not surprising when one considers that the drug, which is derived from the poppy, has been used for medicinal and "magical" purposes for thousands of years. Mythology supports this notion as the Greek god, *Hypnos*, was the god of sleep and was usually depicted with poppies in hand and standing in doorways surrounded by poppies leading others to a world of dreams. The Roman equivalent, *Somnus*, was the "bringer of sleep." In Mythology the poppy also had association with the underworld as it was capable of causing eternal sleep: death. The Latin word for poppy, derived from *Somnus*, is *papaver somniferum* which means "sleep bringing," "narcotic," "deadly" ("Poppy," par. 4).

Scientifically, opium is said to be effective as an analgesic, narcotic, and sedative, as well as providing other medical benefits. The opium, created from the latex within the plant, can be refined into many forms and can be ingested, smoked, brewed into a tea, or injected. Heroin, morphine, and codeine are also derived from poppies. There are two strong characteristics of opium highs: profound relaxation or sleep, and, typical of hallucinogens, very intense, vivid dreams. Opium has also been thought to possess aphrodisiac qualities.

This aphrodisiac quality is evident in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" dream-poem, which contains many allusions to sex and sexuality. His reference to a "pleasure-dome" is followed by descriptions of scenery that can easily be associated with the female anatomy, thereby indicating that the "pleasure" to which he refers is sexual: "[...] that deep romantic chasm which slanted/down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover" (2, 12, 13). The "chasm" or "slant" is suggestive of a vagina, and its "cedarn cover" recalls pubic hair. Coleridge also refers to a "woman wailing for her demon-lover" and describes "turmoil seething" from the chasm (16, 17). These metaphors invoke visual and audible interpretations characteristic of a woman experiencing orgasm.

Coleridge continues by symbolizing the sexual climax of a male through his explicit depiction of geologic orgasm:

As if this earth in fast thick pants were
breathing
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted Burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And mid those dancing rocks at once and
ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river. (18-24)

The auditory image of "fast thick pants" calls to mind a rapid, heavy breathing that occurs as orgasm nears. The "mighty fountain [...] forced" and "huge fragments vaulted" are equated to ejaculation and emphasized by the "half-intermitted Burst" which is characteristic of the pulses of male climax. He is using the earth and nature to personify this very human experience, even emphasizing the passionate joining of man and woman with rushed and vigorous words: "forced," "vaulted," and "flung" as a crescendo is reached with the "dancing rocks" (the ejaculate) going up the "sacred river" (the vaginal tract) (24). Whether Coleridge normally had sexually explicit thoughts or fantasies is not known; however, the fact that they manifested themselves so clearly during his drug-induced dream and in the poem of "Kubla Khan," more than in anything else he had written, suggests that the drug either put those thoughts in his mind, or unearthed something that might have been repressed.

But the effect of the opium would be more than psychological. Hallucinogens of this kind also affect vision by increasing the pressure within the eye, not unlike what one would experience while pressing down on the closed eyelid, which would account for the occurrence of unusual patterns in the poem ("Hallucinogens and Creativity" pars. 15-16). Coleridge's visions of "Kubla Khan," so filled with scenes of light and darkness—"sunless sea," "sunny spots," "gardens bright," the "shadow of the dome"—together with vast differences in depth between the landscape and caves and caverns, and varying types of uncontrolled movement—"forced," "burst," "flail," "flashing," and

"floating"—could very well be impressions created by the eye pressure existing while on opium, as the uniqueness of these visions seemed to have surfaced only in "Kubla Kahn."

Other opium users describe their highs and the imaginative effects of the drug in similar terms, whether they smoked opium in the ubiquitous opium dens, or imbibed it in the form of laudanum, a tincture of opium dissolved in alcohol to make it more palatable often prescribed by doctors, as was Coleridge's case. Philosopher Thomas de Quincey, for instance, wrote of his battle with opium addiction in *Confessions of an Opium-Eater*, published shortly after Coleridge wrote "Kubla Khan." de Quincey remarked that his perceptions of space and time were "both powerfully affected" affected by opium: space was expansive, time was infinite and buildings and landscapes so vast the eye could not see them in their entirety (de Quincey, par.15). Coleridge reflects this same notion when he refers to "caverns measureless to man," fertile ground that is "twice five miles," and a river "meandering" for five miles (4, 6, 25). Time, too, is exaggerated: "Kubla heard from far ancestral voices"(30). de Quincey also refers to his dreams being "chiefly architectural: [containing] such pomp cities and palaces" as he had never seen before unless as images formed in clouds (de Quincey, par.15). Coleridge's poem contains similar elements. He calls the palace of his dream a "stately pleasure dome" implying a grand structure designed as a source of gratification that is surrounded by "walls and towers"(2, 7, my emphasis).

Water, and an associated sense of hopelessness, also played an integral part in de Quincey's opium highs. He describes lakes "shining like mirrors" evolving into "seas and oceans," but claims also that the water could be rough, and that human faces imploring and full of despair begin to become visible in these seas (de Quincey, par.23). There are numerous references in "Kubla Khan" that support this aspect of the opium dream. Coleridge writes of both a "sunless sea" and a "lifeless ocean," images that are devoid of hope (5, 28). Although he does not see human faces, he hears human voices, evident in his reference to a "woman wailing" (16).

Music was vital to self-proclaimed opium-eater Thomas de Quincey, who consumed the drug every Saturday without fail before attending the Opera to take in the sounds of his favorite singer, sounds that gave him considerable "sensual pleasure" while under the influence. His experience was that opium made the mind more active and therefore rather than "communicating with the music" by the ear, as he felt was the error made by most people, he determined that the mind reacted to what the ear was hearing and was therefore able to discern the different sounds and find "elaborate intellectual pleasure"(de Quincey, par.12) as well as the sensuality it induced. Modern day opium addicts make similar references to the importance and engaging effects of music. One user stated:

Everything was profound in a very positive

way, especially the music since it resonated everywhere. [...] It was as if the music was so well put together, puissant and poignant that all I could do was marvel in its preeminence. The climaxes were so fierce I felt I was going to collapse. I was truly spellbound. ("Profound Inaugural Experience" pars.12-13)

Similarly, amidst the turmoil and confusion of "Kubla Khan," the poet in his high "hears" the serenity of a young woman playing a dulcimer and he refers to the "deep delight" her "symphony and song" gives him and even feels that the music gives him the power needed to "build that dome" (43, 44, 46). The difference for him, however, was his ability to compose or recall music that existed only in his imagination, unlike the others who reacted to music that was in fact being played. It seems he required the opium to be able to tap into this aspect of his creativity in order to write about the sounds that surfaced within his mind, thereby leaving the reader to wonder if he would have been able to hear and interpret his imagined music without the drug. His ability to invoke sound where it did not exist, even if facilitated by opium, can be considered remarkable because his description of the sound is very explicit and even reflects emotion, whereas de Quincey needed actual music to summon even a fraction of what Coleridge interpreted and felt.

The use of hallucinogens has been widely studied in art criticism. One researcher feels that hallucinogens provide proof that the mind does not run at full capacity because the visions created are beyond anything the artists could summon under their own power. The drugs are not creative in their own right, but rather shift the concentration of the brain from one hemi-sphere to the other thus opening the mind to less familiar cerebral receptors ("Hallucinogens and Creativity," pars. 15-16). If one enters into a mental realm beyond their natural reach through artificial (chemical) means, the artist must exercise creativity, judgment, and control in order to convert what they have artificially conceived into an art form (Smale, *Commentary* 463).

Al Alvarez specifically looks at Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and only loosely refers to the work as "composition" because the images appeared before him without "any sensation or conscious effort" thus questioning the existence of any cognitive decision-making with the work. The author makes reference to what Freud would have called "dream work," basically thoughts surfacing as things and thinking being dramatized: the thoughts being pulled from the subconscious and made significant (783-784). If Freud is correct, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" would never have existed had it not been for opium because he never would have had access to this particular vision on his own. It is important, however, to understand that it was *his* vision, despite its being facilitated by the drug, and the fact that he experienced the vision as a poem, and was able to record a portion of that poem is a verification of his literary genius; he

recognized the value of what the opium showed him, whereas someone else may have just enjoyed the peculiar journey without ascribing it any worth.

Had Coleridge been working through primary or secondary imagination, he might have been able to retain all the text that appeared to him in his dream. Ironically and sadly, the only way he was able to see the words of "Kubla Kahn" was in this drug-induced, tertiary level of imagination, and being in this level, he lacked the cognitive ability to ultimately remember all the words that had materialized for him. While Coleridge had the capability to write incredible works, the visions which he wrote about in "Kubla Khan" possessed characteristics of an opium high that were consistent with the visions de Quincey and others had experienced while under the same influence. With his talent, Coleridge was able to convert his dream into a brilliant literary work. However, sole recognition for the dream that resulted in this extraordinary poem must be bestowed upon his relationship with the poppy, "for he on honey-dew [had] fed/And drank the milk of paradise" (53-54).

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