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Kubla Khan as a Guide to Orientalism

On an opium-infused visit to the depths of the human mind, Samuel Coleridge experienced the ineffable. In a struggle to convey this magical experience he attempted to use language, yet he recognized that language was not up to the task, though his effort was recorded in his poem “Kubla Khan”. In this journey where an alternate state of mind attempts to express itself through regular words, the reader is treated to an observation of the Western psyche. Through a detailed analysis of “Kubla Khan” one can prove that almost every claim made by Said is true. This will be accomplished in three steps, first determining why Coleridge uses the Orient, then searching for the reason that this usage is successful, and then connecting this to Said’s claim that the entire branch of Orientalism is “tinged with the gross political fact” (Said 11).

“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan // A stately pleasure dome decree”. For a Westerner, the very word Xanadu immediately brings to mind a foreign land, a mystic place of enchantment. As such, Xanadu is merely a tool employed by Coleridge to create the image of an exotic place far from the reality of Western society. Kubla Khan is an ancient ruler who existed in a distant society, unlike Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar, and as a result is free from the restraint of Western conceptions. One can suppose that Kubla Khan acted with indifference to Christianity and Western morals, with his actions only capable of being explained through a distinct culture. Decreeing a pleasure dome is in deep contrast to the supposed morals of the Western world yet in this mystic land there is nothing wrong with it. As a result Kubla is straight-forward with his desire for pleasure, an honesty that could never be found in the West. He goes directly to the point, attempting to make his dream real. Yet in the following stanza one goes from this imagined land of the known unknown, to an unimaginable land of the unknown unknown. “Where Alph, the sacred river, ran // Through caverns measureless to man // Down to a sunless sea.” The reader is suddenly thrust into the unknowable, yet this unknowable is directly related to the dome. The dome could not exist if it were not for the river, but the river is simultaneously a dangerous reality that leads to the dome’s destruction. The river then goes beyond the surface to a deep sunless sea. So what does it mean? That the unconscious mind is that which is truly in control, impacting everything one does, tinging everything. In this manner, Coleridge can be used to perfectly explain and support Said’s main point.

“So twice five miles of fertile ground // With walls and towers were girdled round: // And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills, // Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;” Twice five miles of fertile ground immediately brings to the mind a large expanse of virgin land ready for the taking. Walls and towers of course serve to enclose this natural untamed beauty. With gardens filled with winding waterways, the river tamed. With many trees spread throughout, with incense none less. To build the dome, first the wild land must be tamed. The West attempts to impose itself onto the Orient. It enters into the odd situation and attempts to sort it out by applying theories of understanding, such as historicism. It becomes an area where it is possible to use this flawed understanding to create a few things of value, the gardens, the trees, or a colony. “And here were forests ancient as the hills, // Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.” The imposition of the West spreads to other virgin lands removing the ancient forests for the sake of sunny spots of greenery. These other lands will later be ready for the West to enter, but at the moment were only being traced out. “But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted // Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!” Near the paradise-like area of the dome there is an enormous fissure, hidden for the moment by the vegetation. Although the West may have believed that they were entering a virgin land ready to be absorbed into Western thought, they were incapable of even seeing it all. “A savage place! as holy and enchanted // As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted // By woman wailing for her demon-lover!” For the first exclamation, the metaphor can simply be taken further, seeing the savage place as the hidden reality of the Orient. Yet what role does the demon-loving woman play? It is not as if Coleridge could have inserted a single word that was not essential, that had no meaning. The waning moon casts a dim light upon the savage place, with the woman wishing to be discovered. The West, Kubla, is the demon-lover who comes searching for the secret. The secret wishes to be found, but can only be expressed upon contact, it comes into being with its discovery. “And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething, // As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing, // A might fountain momently was forced:”

Upon the discovery of that which lays hidden to the West, explosions erupt. Many times it is the eruption itself which forces people to realize that things existed that were not available from the surface. For instance, one does not know of the exploitation of child laborers in China by Apple until multiple suicides show that the problem was always there, but had never been addressed. In the next lines one finds that this explosion causes the destruction of the dome. More accurately the dome exists in a new reality, combining sun with ice. It now exists as a product of the hidden combined with the obvious. The West’s psyche is changed by this new development. “If the Orient could represent itself, it would” (Said 21). That hidden by the canopy cannot be uncovered until it comes into direct contact with the dome. In other words the Orient could not express itself until the Western way of thinking came across it.

To find the source for Coleridge’s poem one need go no farther than *The Travels of Marco Polo*. “You arrive at a city called Xandú, built by the great Khubilai, now reigning. In this he caused a palace to be erected, of marble and other handsome stones, admirable as well for the elegance of its design as for the skill displayed in its execution” (Polo 99). Polo then goes on to describe the beauty of the halls, chambers, gardens, and so on, creating the entire backdrop to Coleridge’s poem. This if of course unsurprising for anyone who has read the prologue to the poem where Coleridge explicitly states that he was reading *Purchas Pilgrimage,* a book that borrows heavily from Polo, when he dozed off and wrote the entire poem in a dream. Upon waking he attempted to write everything he remembered, but was unable to finish due to an interruption. As many have pointed out, this prologue is probably an invention only meant to increase the wondrous feeling that the poem wishes to convey. Nonetheless, it is clear that Polo ingrained an image of the Orient into the collective unconscious of the West. It is for this reason that Coleridge can successfully use the Orient to give an idea of the exotic. If not for the fact that the entire Orient is tinged by the gross political fact, the tool would no longer hold any power. That today people can still easily understand the meaning Coleridge wishes to express, shows that the collective idea of the Orient is still that of “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1).

When Polo told the stories of his travels, he was probably unaware of the enormous impact they would have on all subsequent studies related to the Orient. Yet this is what happens, because the unconscious mind absorbs these stories regardless of their truthfulness. Using Coleridge one can express this in a clear form. Suppose for a moment that Kubla Khan is the embodiment of the West and that his stately pleasure dome is an attempt to rationalize the world with the river holding the entirety of human prejudices and preconceptions. The West, Kubla, is attempting to neutrally analyze everything, by building a dome, yet this neutrality cannot exist as expression is dependent upon some assertions, for nothing can exist without the river, eventually if the dome is built and the river forgot, if one acts as if everything can be rationally and neutrally explained, the river will come back to destroy it, reality will assert that nothing is universal. Polo exists in the sunless sea if one accepts that the unconscious mind is the sea, silently driving all interpretations of the Orient and casting them as exotic.

Said criticizes the entire study of the Orient yet does not provide an alternative approach. If one looks to Coleridge, continuing the previous metaphor, one arrives at an interesting conclusion. Towards the end of the poem, Coleridge suddenly interrupts himself and writes of how he once had a vision of the completed dome but cannot ever build it himself. Supposing that his prologue is an invention and that Coleridge intentionally creates this interruption, one is left questioning why he would choose to do so. The dome is not special because it is in a perfect form, but rather because it is the expression of perfection. “A damsel with a dulcimer // In a vision once I saw: // It was an Abyssinian maid, // And on her dulcimer she played, // Singing of Mount Abora.” Here the damsel is singing of a lost paradise, of the loss of perfection that comes with consciousness. Coleridge wishes to return to this perfect understanding, but he is unable to for the limit arises with the very consciousness he uses to express himself. Assuming once again that the dome is the attempt to rationalize everything, does not Coleridge give a warning against this attempt? Although the attempt to have perfect knowledge is tempting, it is impossible. Complete neutrality or universality are nonexistent. The West, Kubla and Colerdige, attempts to replace God as the source of perfection, but this could only be possible in a manufactured vision. Anyone who attempts to do this must instead “Beware! Beware!” for they have either reached God-like power or, more likely, are posing as having accomplished that which is impossible. So what is to be done? People must accept that complete neutrality is impossible and be aware that their attempts are likely flawed. They should continue to attempt and reach a truth, but be aware that it is not a pure truth. At best they can accept that what they are doing will always be tinged by the gross political fact, but try to make slight adjustments to make it less so. As Coleridge has done, one should document these attempts to build a sunny dome with caves of ice and hope that the next time others will make sure to evade one’s mistakes.

Works Cited

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