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Finding the 'I' in Imagination:

“Kubla Khan” as the Solution to the Problem of the Individual in Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is commonly read as a poem extolling the graces of Christian hospitality. Once the Mariner “inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good women,” both the reader and the Mariner are barraged with a catalogue of suffering that is only lifted when the Mariner finally learns to praise even that which is foreign to him. The result is a poem that, read in this fashion, seems guilty of overt moralizing, even though it claims to legitimize that moralizing through its presentation as an archaic ballad. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was, in spite of his fanatical devotion to science and metaphysics, a self-proclaimed Christian, and it is certainly not difficult to be persuaded that the ballad’s meaning is to be found entirely within the words of the 1817 version’s final marginal gloss: “And to teach by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth” (614-617, gloss). Indeed, Coleridge apparently calls for both his Mariner and his readers to become participants in his notion of the One Whole. Yet the very nature of this ending to *The Rime* introduces a paradox with the basic tenets of Romanticism. How are we to resolve this belief in collectivity as a property of the divine with the Romantic trust in the imaginative power of the individual?

When we read *The Rime* with this concern for the individual in mind, it becomes disturbingly inadequate. David Mao offers a fascinating interpretation of the poem, claiming that *The Rime* is a poem about imagination and fancy, as well as Coleridge’s ambiguity of belief in the supernatural. As opposed to reading the slaying of the albatross as an act of inhospitality, Mao sees the killing of the bird as the triumph of the imagination. In this act, he claims the progress of poesy is rewritten “as the destiny of a single human being,” the mariner representing a new order of poetic imagination that does not require the fancy of the supernatural (84). The albatross, linked as it is with the Polar Spirit and the other fantastic elements of the poem, is seen as emblematic of this realm of the supernatural.

What is particularly appealing to me about this reading is that it provides an answer for the problematic question of why the Mariner shoots the albatross in the first place. Coleridge’s good friend William Wordsworth found fault in the poem, asserting that the Mariner “does not act, but is continually acted upon” (Mellor and Matlak 698). Yet the Mariner is apparently exhibiting a bewildering case of unrestrained action when he kills the albatross; an examination of the lines leading up to the shooting offers no logical reason for this act. However, if we view the Mariner in his metaphorical capacity as a representative of the poetic individual, the murder can at least make some sort of symbolic sense, much more than characterizing it as the mere result of unmotivated inhospitality.

There is ample evidence supporting this reading of the Mariner as a poet himself. As David Wilkes has noted, Part Four of *The Rime* contains a condensed version of the poetic composition process

which Wordsworth described in “Tintern Abbey” (203). The sight of the sea worms, seen as something beautiful, releases the Mariner’s soul into its capacity for poetic praise:

O happy living things! no tongue
 Their beauty might declare:
 A spring of love gushes from my heart,
 And I blessed them unaware!
 Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
 And I blessed them unaware.

The self same moment I could pray;
 And from my neck so free
 The Albatross fell off, and sank
 Like lead into the sea. (*Rime* 286-95)

This is a moment of inspiration for the Mariner, and that inspiration is followed by transcendence. Yet this inspiration appears to have occurred at an unconscious level. We are told that he blesses the snakes “unaware,” and, as if the fact is particularly important, we are told so again. It is important that this blessing is preceded by the notion that “no tongue/ Their beauty might declare”. The word “might” is especially noticeable. It is not the case that no living soul *can* declare the beauty of the water snakes, but instead the possibility that no one actually *will* do so seems to be cause for concern. This recognition, the idea that the wonder of the water snakes is a mystery that no mortal has bothered to unlock, is the notion that prompts the Mariner’s unconscious blessing. The parallel with the early stanzas of “Tintern Abbey” is striking. In Wordsworth’s poem, after the poet depicts the beauty of the natural scene that surrounds him, he comments on the way in which the memory of the beauty has affected his life, even after years away from the geographical point featured in the poem: “Though absent long,/ These forms of beauty have not been to me,/ As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye” (“Abbey” 24-6). Wordsworth assigns the credit for his sublime poetic ability to the influence of the natural scene of the cliffs. What is of even more interest is the way that this beauty is similar to the “unaware” blessings of the Mariner. Wordsworth asserts that the natural forms are responsible for “feelings too/ Of *unremembered* pleasure; such, perhaps,/ As may have had no trivial influence/ On that best portion of a good man’s life” (“Abbey” 31-4, my emphasis). While Wordsworth acknowledges that the secluded cliffs of his poem have had a profound impact on his existence, he also demonstrates that much of that impact has occurred at an unconscious level. It is this unconscious appreciation of the natural object that inspires both poetry and praise, and it is a quality that the Mariner and the speaker of Wordsworth’s poem appear to share. Wilkes points out that much like his counterpart in “Tintern Abbey,” the Mariner becomes “a sadder and a wiser man” once his soul is able to comprehend both the beauty of nature and human truth (204).

Anne Williams argues that *The Rime* demonstrates the process by which the individual subject is asserted. In her words, it “concerns not the creative Imagination so much as the creation of Imagination” (1115). In other words, this is an early step taken by Coleridge to assert the poetical possibility of the individual soul. Even so, this new imagination is punished due to that very association with a single being – something that destroys the common bond between life and world and compromises the integrity of the One Whole (Mao 89). Cosmic order asserts its superiority over the Mariner, forcing the abandonment of

individual genius. The final outcome can then be seen as Coleridge's discomfort with the power of this genius, as the Mariner is doomed to repeat forever his brush with individuality to passers-by as penance for the act itself.

I wish to argue that Coleridge does achieve a resolution of the paradox that plagues his Mariner, and that the resolution is found in "Kubla Khan." Of course, the issue is somewhat murky; both "Kubla Khan" and the initial version of *The Rime* were composed in 1797, and in spite of the rather precise placement of "Kubla Khan" in the summer of 1797, it is difficult to say which poem was written first, or even to conclude whether or not their compositions overlapped. Even so, the unique situation of "Kubla Khan" as a fragment produced in a hallucinatory state allows for the possibility that Coleridge may have been adopting a view of imagination he would not otherwise be ready to employ. Thus, I propose that "Kubla Khan" does what *The Rime* cannot – celebrate the imaginative potential of the individual.

Coleridge's own theory of imagination demonstrates his belief in imagination as a necessarily self-conscious act: "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (*BL* 749). The Imagination is a power whose perception gives the subject a sense of their own identity. The subject is then able to re-cast the world in its own image (Williams 1124). It is this power, adopted by the Mariner, which Coleridge is apparently unable to sustain in *The Rime*. There can be little doubt that the Mariner is exhibiting this power in his killing of the albatross. As Williams astutely points out, the Mariner actually uses the pronoun "I" for the first time in this act – "I shot the ALBATROSS" (Williams 118; *Rime* 82). The violence of self-recognition is here depicted, with disastrous consequences for both the natural world and the Mariner himself. The two forces, imaginative individual as enactor of the world, and also the autonomy of the world itself, are placed in opposition to each other, resulting in a struggle over the power to make meaning. In this instance, it is the individual who proves the weaker. The world of order, represented though it may be by the supernatural, thrusts itself upon the Mariner, forcing him to abandon his briefly held position as composer of the world around him. This superiority attributed to the fixed nature of order is curious given Coleridge's own literary theory. He saw poetry as a way to unify reason and the senses, and to stimulate the imagination to an awareness of its own self-conscious nature (Wheeler 17). Yet it cannot be denied that the Mariner is indicted precisely for his attempt to exalt that self-consciousness. Interestingly, this feature of Coleridge's ballad is noticeably un-Romantic. "One of the constitutive and motivating features of English Romantic poetry," Peter Hühn says, "is an unprecedented degree of self-consciousness accompanied by a marked tendency to self-analysis and the emergence of a distinct selfhood alienated from others and threatened in its existence" (230). The dramatic action of the poem, in the isolation of the Mariner both geographically in the Antarctic and socially as an outcast of his shipmates, certainly adheres to this aesthetic, but the problem is found in the resolution. The Mariner must reintroduce himself into the world he has removed himself from, fixing himself once more as a passive character subject to, not enactor of, the order of things around him. He must relinquish his position as a composer, even in his capacity as a continual storyteller, for the story he must repeat again and again is merely one of narrative relation as opposed to one of poetic composition.

Lawrence Venuti offers the following as a definition of the Individual in Romantic poetry: "the concept of the human subject as a free, unified consciousness that transcends the epistemological limitations of biography and history and is the origin of meaning, knowledge and action" (163). Why,

then, does *The Rime* seem to chastise itself for attempting to embrace this concept? There are two answers to this question, found in those forces synonymous with taboo, politics and religion.

Peter Kitson reads *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as the result of Coleridge's loss of faith in political action, a reading he feels is demanded when considering the work in the context of Coleridge's earlier writings (204). Coleridge devoutly believed in the intersection of politics and poetry, and his early works were conscious efforts to invoke social change. However, by the time he wrote *The Rime*, Coleridge had become disillusioned with politics, specifically with the French Revolution. He was also deeply conscious, though, of a guilt suffered by his own country. He believed that Great Britain's collective guilt was a reflection of the shared Original Sin (Kitson 205). The power of the individual, viewed in this context, becomes something dangerous as well as enlightening. There is an element of guilt apparent in the individual's removal of self from the community, and this removal will eventually prompt shame and disgrace, as we see in the Mariner's punishment of wearing the albatross around his neck. The Mariner can only relieve himself of this shame by reinserting himself in the community through an acknowledgement of his fellow creatures, namely the blessing of the water snakes. The shame pictured here is representative of that felt by Coleridge himself. As a philosopher who considered himself deeply religious, Coleridge viewed as a crime his own belief and encouragement in mankind to improve itself without the aid of grace (Kitson 205).

Along with the loss of faith in political action, the reasoning behind Coleridge's refusal to embrace the imaginative power of the individual no doubt also lies in his devotion to ensuring the place of religion in his philosophical treatises. While he would never deny the necessity of metaphysics, he felt that the Christian vision was not something defined categorically, but instead something transcendent (Hedley 134). The ultimate goal of Coleridge's poetics is not an ability to see and paint the world, but a recreation of the self in the order of the divine. In *The Rime*, though, this ascension is only achieved through an engagement in the usual notion of Christian charity. Rather than the transcendence being an exaltation of the self, it is in the recognition of the fallibility of the individual, pictured in the end as a penitent sinner. The concept of Original Sin necessitates a division between the divine and the individual, and Coleridge's adherence to Christianity as a founding principle of his philosophy engenders the paradox of the poem. Any poem, in fact, composed as an exploration of the divine qualities of the self while confined to an acceptance of the fallibility of man will result in this paradox.

However, in the production of "Kubla Khan," Coleridge is able to throw all guiding principles aside. As he states in his prose headnote to the poem, he views the work not as a production resulting from his own poetical philosophy, but instead as a work of art that he seized from the hazes of a vision:

The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; 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. (KK, headnote)

Regardless of whether or not the words above are entirely truthful, what this headnote allows Coleridge is a remarkable amount of freedom. Any departure from his usual notions of philosophy or religion is excused, because by the poet's own admission this is not the work of the poet himself. Thus, the

obstacles that hampered the ultimate fulfillment of the self as divine in *The Rime* are surmounted, and the imaginative power of the individual is celebrated without any boundaries.

One of the ways that "Kubla Khan" is able to achieve this is by reinventing the way source material for poetic inspiration is treated. According to Peter Kitson, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* "shows the progress from motiveless sin to individual redemption achieved through the agency of natural forces 'impregnated' with the divine" (207). While I do not necessarily agree with the argument that the Mariner's sin was completely motiveless, it is clear that he finds redemption through his recognition of the divine properties of the water snakes. The water snakes are divine in their very association with the natural world and the One Whole, and the Mariner has to reinsert himself into this order so that his sin may be forgiven. There is an effort made to unify the individual with the source for inspiration, rather than depart from and build on it. While the Mariner's poetic act is an act of association and collectivity that compromises the concept of the individual, the speaker of "Kubla Khan" enacts a complete removal from the object that provokes his poetry. The counterpart to the water snakes, which provide the Mariner with the object for praise, is found in Coleridge's source material for "Kubla Khan," the book the poet left open on his lap as he succumbed to his drowsy hallucinations: *Purchas's Pilgrimage*. In the Mariner's case, the object is already invested with divine properties, and it is simply a matter of unmasking those divine properties to allow the capacity for praise, even if that act of unmasking does occur at an unconscious level. In "Kubla Khan" there is no unmasking, for there are no divine properties in the words of *Purchas's Pilgrimage* before Coleridge actually places them there; in this latter case, the divine inspiration finds its origination in the poet himself, rather than the object. According to Venuti, the act of poetic composition in Coleridge's theory occurs when the poet spontaneously sympathizes with his text (164). As we can see, the manner in which this sympathy occurs depends greatly on the role of the individual in the poem. While in *The Rime* the poet is humbled, recognizing his own inability to function as a creator of meaning as opposed to a discoverer of it, "Kubla Khan" demonstrates a belief in poetic genius that can spring forth from the internal senses.

An examination of "Kubla Khan" allows us to see how Coleridge relies on individual genius to reinvent the object of the poem, namely the following sentences from *Purchas's Pilgrimage*: "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed (sic) with a wall" (KK, headnote). Coleridge takes these words and transplants them metaphorically into the arena of the individual mind, where poetic genius is allowed to run its course in reconstituting the prose into poetry. Just as *The Rime* is often read as a metaphor for the composition process, so has "Kubla Khan," and it is a fairly common critical approach to do so. The manner of self-referentiality in "Kubla Khan," while evidently present, is an extremely complex one. The speaker of the poem does focus on himself in his poetic role, but he manages to disguise this self-referentiality while simultaneously thematizing it (Hühn 234). This act of disguising is achieved in the treatment of the composition process as a landscape, one that actually represents the human mind. The traditional manner of reading the poem is to see it as a reconciliation of opposites (Schneider 69). While it is true that a reconciliation of the disparate elements of the poet is achieved, to read "Kubla Khan" with only an appreciation for the way the poet synthesizes the contrasts severely limits any understanding. The key to unlocking the meaning of the poem in its representation of the composition process is to read the successive stanzas as first a consideration of the object, then the work of unrestricted imagination, and at last the reassembly of the object as poetry based on the imagination.

The first stanza allows for a consideration of the words Coleridge was left to ponder as he drifted off into his "profound sleep." Lines 1-11 do little to reconstitute the source material, although they do extend on it. However, whatever extensions are made do not compromise the original intention of the source; they merely serve to paint a fuller, more recognizable picture of the object that the poet is to reconstruct into poetry. This initial instance of the creative process is one in which the artist's significance is downplayed. This first stanza can be read as the positive counter-model to what follows. The creator of the landscape, the artist, Kubla Khan, is mentioned only once. The emphasis is on the material work that "comes into being." Because of the focus placed on the artwork, there is no question of subjectivity or self-consciousness on the part of the artist (Hühn 235). This first part of composition is the process of "arranging and ornamenting" (Chayes 8). The material object is dominant, because the artist has yet to assert himself. This state, interestingly enough, is actually the state to which the Mariner returns at the end of his poem, once he has blessed the water snakes. Here, though, the precedence of the ordered world is only temporary.

The artist begins to function in the second stanza, in which the imagination is unleashed. Here, we have the first instances of an extension of creativity that goes beyond *Purchas's Pilgrimage*. The fountain described in this stanza may be Coleridge's concept of the primary imagination, while the "sacred river" that is "flung up" by the fountain may be the secondary imagination (Chayes 10). As noted earlier, the primary imagination is an act of self-consciousness, and, just as observed in the Mariner's killing of the albatross, that self-consciousness can be an act of violence. This seems to support such a reading of the fountain, which violently enters the landscape: "A mighty fountain momentarily was forced" (KK 19). While the primary imagination is important in its initial separation of the poet from the surrounding world, the true ability for reconstitution of the natural world as poetry is found in the secondary imagination. In the *Biography Literaria*, Coleridge defines the secondary imagination as a power that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" (750). While the fountain provides the foundation for the imagination, the task of changing and shaping the landscape is up to the river. Just as a literal river shapes the surrounding landscape in its effort to carve a path out of rock and soil, this figurative river reorders the vision of Kubla Khan's garden.

While the imagination is now present in the poem, the speaker has not yet achieved the final recreation of the world in his own image that marks him as a poet of individual genius. This is found in the third stanza, during which the forces of the conscious will reconstitute the unbridled imagination into poetry (Chayes 16). Here, the river of imagination and the pleasure dome of the object world intersect in meaningful fashion: "The shadow of the dome of pleasure/ Floated midway on the waves" (KK 31-2). Not only do the forces come together, but an aesthetic consciousness emerges about the function of the images in the first two stanzas (Wheeler 20). The stanza concludes with the following couplet: "It was a miracle of rare device,/ A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!" (KK 36). The speaker is aware not only that the effect created here is "rare," but that it is indeed a "miracle." The composition of poetry that is achieved here is, according to the poet himself, nothing less than divine. Yet, unlike in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the divine inspiration came solely from the poet.

The resolution here is a recognition of the poetic power of the individual, and the reluctant nature of *The Rime* is thrown aside as Coleridge fully embraces this concept. Whether or not "Kubla Khan" actually represents the triumph of the individual, however, is difficult to say. There will always be the headnote reminding us of Coleridge's supposed discomfort with the poem. Perhaps *The Rime* represents

a sober examination of individual genius, while "Kubla Khan" presents us with a reckless, unrestrained look at the power of the individual with no regard for the consequences. There may always be an inherent contradiction in the Romantic 'I' and Coleridge's belief in the all-encompassing One Whole, and it may be that the contradiction is an impossible one to resolve. For while the poet in "Kubla Khan" does achieve an ultimate reinsertion into the natural landscape of the object world, the concluding lines of the poem leave us with the uncomfortable notion that the manner in which he has done so is actually nothing other than blasphemy:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with hold dread:
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drank the milk of Paradise. (*KK* 49-54)

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