

“Kubla Khan”: Genesis of an archetype

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«Kubla Khan» has been so often cited as a dream specimen that a curious belief has grown up – accepted even in scholarly quarters – that the work now floats in a vast sea of psychoanalytic interpretation. But in fact scarcely more than an occasional Freudian or Jungian spray ever reaches the poem.

(Norman Fruman, *Coleridge: The Damaged Angel*, 394)

I

The circumstances of the composition of «Kubla Khan» (1797) are well known, at least if we trust Coleridge’s reminiscences, some nineteen years afterwards (1816), though many questions arise as to his trustworthiness.¹

For the time being, however, it is simpler to retain the general picture drawn by the poet in his introductory account, for, in the end, all we have at our disposal is a text, a piece of discourse, and the question of knowing whether it is the result of a deliberate intention or not can in no way lead us to a fuller understanding of «Kubla Khan.» The particular circumstances described by Coleridge evoke the idea of what takes place when a dreamer, on awakening, reports his or her dream. The 1816 annotation gives a good, although general, description of the process: while reading – and here we already have an example of what psychoanalysis calls *day’s residue* –, the poet fell asleep, and in a state of “profound”

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¹ Several critics have indeed questioned the poet’s testimony and have even gone as far as considering the dream-poem as a «Coleridgean hoax,» a «parody, or lyrical *jeu d’esprit*, let us say,» in the words of Robert F. Fleissner in his *Sources, Meaning, and Influences of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’*. Fleissner, who has read exhaustively on the subject and drawn an impressive list of Kubla Khan criticism, discusses this issue; he particularly mentions E. Schneider, W. B. Ober and W. J. Bate among those who have chosen not to trust Coleridge’s statement. On the «validity of the poet’s prefatory material,» see Fleissner’s final comment: «... the romantic description in the published preface would appear to reveal, at best, poetic license; it simply should not now be accepted too literally.» (p. 63)

sleep composed, or rather reports he composed, from two to three hundred lines (“he could not have composed less than...”), nevertheless prudently adding: “if that indeed can be called composition.” On awakening, he seems to remember those lines and starts putting them down on paper until, unfortunately, he is disturbed by a caller. When he resumes his task, an hour or so later, the “vision” has disappeared “with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images...”²

Can we take Coleridge at his word and accept that “Kubla Khan” is only a *fragment* of what could have been a much longer poem had he not been disturbed? I do not think so, and it is my opinion that we should simply take the said “fragment” as the complete narrative of the mentioned dream, and therefore as a *complete poem*; in other words, there is no reason to imagine it could have had a sequence. Indeed, dreaming one composes a complete, and generally splendid, piece of work is a well-known experience, a fantasy in fact which is never – at least to my knowledge – followed by actual realization. As it is, then, what we have is a poem written after a dream, remarkably, therefore, like the account of such a dream, that is to say of what remained of the “actual” dream that took place while the poet was asleep.

I know that Coleridge insisted that what he dreamt was the poem itself, the text as we have it, with words, lines and stanzas complete, but however fascinating a remark this may be it needn’t have any bearing on the nature of our *object*, as I have just remarked above. Indeed, no one can tell what was really dreamt: the images of which the poem is made and which the poet would have put into words, or these words themselves, these lines even, organized as we can see them in the final text, complete with rhymes, alliterations and assonances? But this, in the end, is of little importance to us since – as is the case with all dreams, let me repeat this – what is left of what the dreamer experienced during sleep is only what he or she remembers *afterwards*. In fact, our hesitations when it comes to defining our object are just an *effect* of the *literary* nature of “Kubla Khan” and nothing else. When confronted with a text like Coleridge’s poem, our doubts as to the very nature of the material under analysis form part of our own reading response to it, that is to say of our literary experience. From the world of dreams,³ the poem inherited a lack of coherence between its three parts⁴ – or at least a coherence that is not easy to establish –, and some imprecision in the scenes described or in the characters mentioned: “pleasure-dome,” “demon-lover,” “the shadow of the dome of pleasure,” “a vision,” “a miracle of rare device.” Naturally, these terms and images can be found in the works of others, Milton being the most prominent example, but they are nonetheless strongly reminiscent of what one may oneself have dreamt: “caverns measureless to man,” “chasm,” not to mention some of the adjectives: “sacred,” “holy and enchanted.” Thus, although “Kubla Khan” should not be taken for a piece of pre-surrealist automatic writing (for Coleridge dreamt, and wrote, a romantic poem), the enterprise resulted in the description, the evocation rather, of a universe that one might think closer to... “truth” – whatever that is –, a world, let us say, exceeding the limits of simple concrete perception, more authentic perhaps, beyond appearances certainly, and with no ordinary status. And from this point of view, I think we must admit the enterprise was successful.⁵

² We shall not know however whether these lines found their way into the finished poem, and if so where in the text.

³ This has naturally been noted by most critics.

⁴ Many – in accordance with the Crewe manuscript – only distinguish two parts, the last twenty four lines being considered as a more or less conscious part and of a different nature therefore as the preceding thirty lines which could be more readily taken to correspond to what the poet’s alludes to in his 1816 presentation. Once again, such a distinction does not seem of great importance to me and I prefer to look at the text published by Coleridge as a single unit. The three parts I distinguish – and some editions of the poem present the same division – simply correspond to the three different moments in the unconscious drama reported in the poem (a dream in two parts followed by the associations linked to it, or a dream in three parts); they are not to be considered as consciously devised “stanzas,” although I may, now and then, use the word. About the discrepancies between the manuscript and the various printed editions of the poem (2, 3 or 4 parts) and for a discussion of the variants, see Shelton and Skeat.)

⁵ Irrespective of the *illusion* I am discussing further down and based on it, no doubt. It is not improbable that “Kubla Khan” generates, in some readers, shall I say, if not in all, the feeling of entering a new and unknown domain, not, perhaps, the “undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns,” but a *territory* close to it. This is an illusion, of course, nothing other than the “stuff” of which our dreams are made, but it is a necessary illusion, an illusion whose structure is that of language and with which we face up to the material world, remote, silent and unfeeling.

Except that for the psychoanalytic critic, the mysterious, strange world referred to in the poem is not so mysterious and can lead us to a more precise, and satisfactory, description of the way humans function. I hope it will be understood that I make a distinction between the pleasure of the reader, of myself as a reader, and what is involved in the task of the analyst, of the scientist who questions our object: however connected, the two enterprises are definitely of a different nature; this is not always understood or taken into consideration; and yet, the same distinction can be made between what the dreamer experiences when he or she dreams and what is at work and is being experienced in the analysis of the dream later on.⁶

It is this difference in nature between the two operations which always prompts me to insist that what the psychoanalytic critic unearths from texts in no way diminishes the pleasure of the reader, although this reassurance doesn't generally suffice to convince "readers." All this to repeat that the ambiguous and difficult task of the analyst is to try and find out what unseen forces were at work in the production of a text, try to see – and hear might be more appropriate here – beyond what we can consider as the "first manifest meaning" of literary discourse. There shouldn't be anything surprising in such an expression, but one may fear it equates dream and literature too easily and without further ado. Let's us therefore for the time being consider it as our hypothesis (a well-known if not well accepted proposition, although the idea that literature has a symbolical dimension is always readily accepted). Quite psychoanalytically – and again there is nothing new in this –, our hypothesis distinguishes various levels of meaning in a text: what we first encounter on reading is akin to a surface, an architectonic layer, but also a screen (and this last point is what distinguishes psychoanalytic criticism from, let us say, standard literary criticism). This surface constitutes a necessary factor or component of literary pleasure but it should not be taken for the sole and ultimate source from which the text proceeds; for indeed for psychoanalysis, unconscious desire is the real "architect" of literary discourse, its prime promoter.

Which amounts to saying that between dream and literature, and this means discourse, any discourse, there is a similarity of *structure*: first, an unconscious "core," and then, *afterwards*, the representation of it. This, naturally, corresponds to the structure of the dream described by Freud, but it may not be so obvious that it can also apply to literature. Here is what we have learnt from Freud, as is no doubt well known: the dream proper, what happens during sleep, must be carefully distinguished from the memory we have of such an unconscious experience. It may be that the original terms, *Traumgedanken and manifester inhalt*, were somewhat awkwardly chosen, particularly the first term, but the distinction is quite clear: what takes place during sleep, what "visits" the dreamer – the dream as we shall never know it⁷ –, corresponds to the "dream-thoughts," *Traumgedanken*, while what follows, what is reminisced as best

I realize the meaning I have given "stuff," here, does not correspond to the one given to the word by Shakespeare in Prospero's renunciation scene (*The Tempest*, IV, 1, 158); yet, if one pays attention to what precedes the famous phrase, the emphasis does seem to be, if not on language, at least on the literary illusion:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like the insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (150-158)

(Sterling's *Tragedie of Darius* (1603) and even Marlowe's *Faustus* have been given as possible sources of this passage. Naturally, the occurrence of "towers," "gorgeous palaces," "solemn temples" and even of the great "globe" cannot go by unnoticed to readers of "Kubla Khan:" a coincidence no doubt, but interesting all the same.)

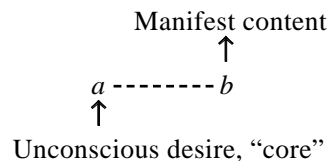
⁶ I have dealt with the problem of the articulation of the (unconscious) experience constituted by a dream and its interpretation by the dreamer in: "Descartes interprète ses songes." *Gradiva, Revue européenne d'anthropologie littéraire*, Lisbon/Paris, Vol. III, N°2, (1998): 179-201.

⁷ And this perfectly justifies the concept of unconscious: on one hand unconscious desire, on the other, representation.

we can is labeled “dream-content,” *Inhalt* or, to be quite specific, *manifestes Inhalt*, (which reinforces the opposition with what was only “latent” and unknown before analysis). In the end, and Freud is adamant on this point, the account of a dream is not the dream, already it is a construction, the result of a first transformation. Perhaps it is now clear why I consider “Kubla Khan” to be such a perfect model for the demonstration that between dream and literature there is no difference *from the point of view of structure*. For whether there was something intentionally (consciously?) written or not in the lines we have, the outcome is remarkably like the “manifest content” (Freud’s meaning) of a dream which Coleridge may well have experienced. (I cannot at this point use the poet’s 1816 presentation to support my argument for it remains too ambiguous, possibly to preserve the idea that images and words were dreamt. The passage deserves to be mentioned, all the same, because of the clear distinction it makes between images and words: “...all the images rose up before [me] as things, with the parallel production of the corresponding expressions...” What of course the presentation does not say is that the words followed the images in time, which would have been a way to speak of latent and manifest contents.) The automatic aspect of the enterprise, then – of part of it at least –, resulted in a piece of discourse which simply rendered manifest what had visited the poet in his dream. It is a “content,” let me repeat this, which is the result of the transformation of “latent” images and words, whatever their origin. This origin, we shall call *unconscious core*, and we shall only be able to make an hypothesis about it thanks to the traces left us by the poet in his narrative.

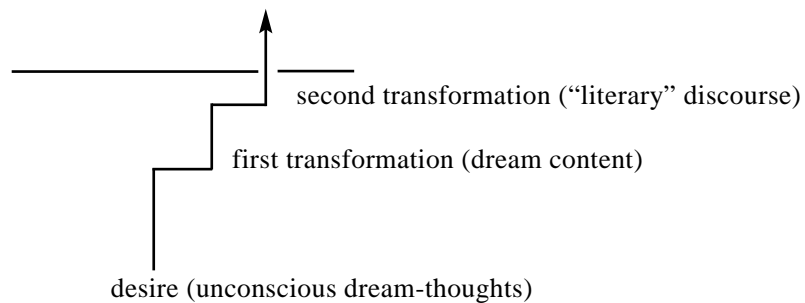
The model does apply to any text, of course, but the particular circumstances of the composition of “Kubla Khan,” that is to say its close relationship with a dream – irrespective of what that relationship was –, and perhaps the spontaneity with which it was put to paper, constitute a factor of great interest for the analyst. And at this point a clarification is needed: can indeed a piece of writing which did not proceed from a decision to compose (the poet didn’t seem to have known what he intended to “communicate”), a piece of writing which was as if directly dictated to the author by the dream he had just experienced, which arrived “all armed” with pleasure-dome, gardens, caverns, chasm and the Abyssinian maid be considered as a text like any other text?

What I have so far emphasized is the structural similarity between dream and literature but I must be more specific. Let us examine the structure of the dream again:



What is illustrated here is the relationship between unconscious desire and its representation, a representation which is the result of a *transformation* which followed the path from *a* to *b*: this is quite precisely the structure of the metaphor. Freud called this transformation “the dream-work,” *Traumarbeit*, insisting – and here lies the heart of one of his discoveries – that unconscious desire could not accede to consciousness without such a transformation, disguise in fact, screen or mask. Hence the apparently incomprehensible, strange aspect of our dreams; all this is well known. The formula I use to describe this movement of our psyche – which, it is important to note, is the fundamental structure of representation, and by this I mean language, the lacanian *parole* – insists on the fact that our dreams, and discourse generally, *at the same time* carry and disguise unconscious desire: *la parole porte et masque à la fois*; which is another way of repeating what I have just quoted from Freud: representation cannot come to our knowledge without a transformation. The Freudian *bar* naturally occupies the center of the structure with a “below” and an “above,” or an “inside” and an “outside,” a cause and an effect, and it is this which, by definition and quite naturally, we tend to forget, insisting on the autonomy of consciousness. At this point, obviously, Freud’s useful concept of “screen memory” comes to mind; but we are going to see that when it comes to literature there is a difference. The fundamental structure I am describing – an unconscious “core” and its transformation/representation –, we find in all texts, but between dream and literature

here ends the analogy and we must, when considering literature, add a factor to the general picture described above. In short, with “literary” texts a further transformation takes place. With “literature,” which we read and which we consider intelligible,⁸ the transformation – which can be represented as following a path of the same structural nature as in the dream, with a clear division between what is conscious and what is not – has another function to fulfill and can be said to amount to a second transformation. The function of this second moment in the transformation process consists in providing unconscious desire with a representation that can be accepted by consciousness: it thus acts as a screen – while still continuing to “carry” desire, to bear its mark “concealed” –, and its efficiency comes from the fact that it has received a second, specific, autonomous function which is enough in itself to justify its existence, a function of communication for instance, or of description or narration. Thus, one way or another, does literature become legible, more easily decipherable, we find, than our dreams: of a nature in the end that can be valued for itself. The place in the structure of this second transformation, which belongs to the domain of what I have called “communication,” can be illustrated as follows:



Following a first transformation – I use “first” and “second” for the sake of a theoretical presentation, for the path followed by our second transformation may well be parallel to that of the other –, which is the result of what Freud calls *Traumarbeit*, dream-work, and which occurs every time language is produced (the slip of the tongue *has* the structure of the dream and is for us a perfect example of this: it cannot be explained until it is decoded, the unconscious desire it expresses has already been submitted to the first transformation I am alluding to, *parole vraie* but nevertheless disguised), following a first transformation, then, comes a second one which results from what we might call *travail d’écriture*, writing-work, whose function it is to render legible what is being produced, to give unconscious desire an appearance that can be, “in other words,” accepted. That this “mask,” as I pointed out above, may well have an interest in itself, there is no doubt, but on no account should this make us forget the other function of discourse. For I must not oversimplify our model for the sake of clarity, and when I speak of the two functions of language it must be understood that these two functions cannot be separated and form part of a single movement, since discourse, as we saw, at once carries and conceals unconscious desire. The simple and plain act by which I name a person or a thing, that is to say represent, replace a referent by a sign – and here I use the terms and the model of the linguist –, at once carries in itself my desire that the word should be the thing *and* implicitly refuses to acknowledge the distance between the two since the illusion that the distance can be bridged is necessary to the success of the operation of language. Language as a denial of absence, this is what, in the end, we should be able to read in “Kubla Khan.” It is this double function, directly tied with unconscious desire, and at its service in fact, which must be acknowledged as the fundamental characteristic of discourse and of literature, desire being recognized as the prime cause, the actual architect of the whole edifice. For indeed, as the analysis of Coleridge’s poem will show, I

⁸ And one also comes across works which are not directly intelligible and which yet are not without an effect on us as readers. What does the critic do in this case?

hope, without unconscious desire – the expression being taken in its most general, structural, sense –, there would not be any language (while we couldn't, on the other hand, speak of unconscious desire if there were not language, no representation).⁹

One will have recognized in what precedes an allusion to the double nature of language: when we speak, or write, we *communicate*, but we also *symbolize*; in the words we pronounce or write there is more than meets the eye, or the ear. It is perhaps when looking at poetry – which never worried much about meaning or communication – that the model I am discussing can best be understood. In the case of poetry,¹⁰ the communication which can be valued in itself, and which I take to have *also* the function of a screen, is reduced to a minimum or does not exist, even. Which brings us back to “Kubla Khan.”

No mediation here, no screen between the dreamer and his product other than the first transformation to which all dreams are submitted, with the consequence that the reader will come to the conclusion that the poem is devoid of meaning in the ordinary sense of the word. No meaning, that is, other than what we have when confronted with the manifest content of a dream, pure poetry, it seems!

What “Kubla Khan” tells us, indirectly, is that one should be very careful – in the case of literature at least – when speaking of communication, and this not only because the notion points to an ideal never reached, but because in Coleridge's poem this dimension is lacking: such an absence should incite us to refrain from taking the said function of communication for the sole dimension of language, thus obliterating its symbolical dimension. In the model above, the Freudian model, things are quite clear: on one hand a function of communication and on the other the function of representation of unconscious desire. But the diagram is theoretical only, and words come to us in one piece. It is because the two functions mentioned are indiscernibly, indistinguishably fused into one that the analysis of the symbolical dimension of language and of literature remains so difficult. What psychoanalysis has taught us is that the natural attitude of the reader (dreamer) – only concerned with his or her hallucinatory pleasure – is antagonistic to that of the analyst (even though the latter will never attain any certainty and will have to accept to progress asymptotically only). This is to say that the analyst, or critic, cannot content himself or herself with remaining a reader only, however talented, and should be careful not to reduce our object to one of its parts only. To mistake what I have called the “mask,” Freud's “screen” – which in literature has its own importance, there is no doubt about this – for the whole of the work amounts to renouncing to a complete understanding of what was finally at stake when it was produced. For discourse is the product of desire: not only does it “carry” it, but is its cause. Meaning is desire. In the same way as in the dream, but with more complexity since a second transformation has taken place, literary discourse is produced by the individual subject for no other reason than to satisfy unconscious desire, that is to say represent – in hallucination – the satisfaction of such desire.

Does all this mean that I am not giving enough importance to the complexity mentioned above, and perhaps even overlooking it? Of course not. The double, ambiguous, nature of representation dispenses us from having to choose between one aspect of the literary object and the other, both should be taken into consideration. No one can deny that the *reception* of literature largely depends on what I have called the “second transformation,” that part of the writing process, *écriture*, whose function is to render legible works of literature. But this is not a reason to remain blind to what happens when discourse is produced. In other terms, I am not forgetting the nature of this transformation, the physical aspect of literature, its “quality,” its rhythms, sounds, musicality, and even the form and colors of its images, but we must also realize that it is precisely the other function of this literary quality to conceal the desire it carries.

This is no doubt why “meaning” is such a difficult notion to handle, and at this point T. S. Eliot's reply when answering a question about *The Waste Land* comes to mind: “It means what it says.” Indeed, we should rather ask what it *does* to us as readers, and what it *did* – probably – to its author,

⁹ Cf. Lacan's statement that language is the condition of the unconscious (and not the other way round!).

¹⁰ And we know that many novelists or playwrights are poets in that sense.

rather than: “What does it mean?” Put in this manner, the question then becomes a question on affect and on desire, it is a direct question about what was very likely implied in the production of a text, it amounts to a question on representation.

What remains, though, is that the whole process was started by a dream, and if “Kubla Khan” cannot be considered as a piece of automatic writing, or as the straight account of a dream, it still retains the traces of what brought about its production. What we are dealing with in this case is the articulation of the original (unconscious) dream-thought with secondary elaboration (and perhaps with what we can call a “literary” elaboration on secondary elaboration, since, to be specific, secondary elaboration is simply the immediate account of the dream).

“Kubla Khan” is made of words, and while their “meaning” in the poem may be difficult to decipher, what they represent – because they bear the traces of unconscious desire – may not be so impossible to discover.

That these words came from “somewhere,” that they were first received by the poet, cannot be questioned: this is a common-place, the words we use were once given us. And at this point, history comes into play – as does intertextuality –, which however still permits me to continue using the Freudian model we have been working with so far. That desire, in dreams as in literary works, cannot be made manifest without the assistance of recent memories or impressions that will be “woven into its texture” simply testifies of the strength of the “censorship imposed by the resistance.” (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 563.)

We know indeed that the material with which the dreamer constructs his or her dream is borrowed from waking life and most often comes from what took place during the day which preceded the occurrence of the dream. The term Freud uses is “day’s residues,” and he insists that whereas these recent impressions form a necessary ingredient in the formation of dreams they should in no way be considered as the motive force which caused the dream:

In my view [...] wishful impulses left over from conscious waking life must be relegated to a secondary position in respect to the formation of dreams. (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 554.)

Written over a hundred years ago, Freud’s monumental, groundbreaking study of dreams started a debate on the concept of “desire” – he mostly used *Wunsch* – that still goes on today. He himself went on and added notes and remarks to his original texts for several decades, sometimes completing previous comments. We may, now that the ground has been cleared and a fundamental structure set up, consider the incidence of unconscious desire on our lives with less hesitation and caution than he seemed to have done at first.¹¹ What I have called, I hope not imprudently, “Freud’s hesitation” can perhaps best be observed in a passage of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, pages 560-562, where a paragraph begins with: “I am now in a position to give a precise account of the part played in dreams by the unconscious wish. I am ready to admit that there is a whole class of dreams the *instigation* of which arises principally or even exclusively from the residues of day-time life [...] But the worry [over my friend’s health (which) had persisted from the previous day] alone could not have made the dream. The *motive force* which the dream required had to be provided by a wish; it was the business of the worry to get hold of a wish to act as the motive force for the dream.”

The whole long section in Chapter VII of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “Wish-Fulfilment,” which deals with the relationship between conscious waking life and the construction of dreams, remains the basis for any discussion on desire,¹² but the relationship between what is conscious and what is unconscious in us, the dynamics of “representation,” is essentially the one we find in his model. What has changed in our views today, in mine in any case, is that the motive force required for the production of a dream

¹¹ And for instance be less inclined than he was to give a decisive role in the production of dreams to conscious waking life wishes that had been left unfulfilled from the previous day.

¹² On the debate on desire, see: Robert Silhol, “On Desire”, *Literature and Psychology*, I.S.P.A., Lisbon 1992, 11-16.

is an unconscious wish and proceeds *from* it to residues of day-time life and not the contrary. What we must not forget is that both factors are needed in the end. The formula is quite simple: no representation without desire, but no desire – accessible to analysis, that is – without representation. Which brings us back to “Kubla Khan” and to the words which compose Coleridge’s poem. They were “received” by the poet, we noted – as all our words are –, but more specifically, here, they were prompted to him by what he had just been reading before falling asleep: Purchas’s *Pilgrimage*.

In 1927, in his impressive and exhaustive study of the books Coleridge had read, John Livingston Lowes set out on a quest to understand the imaginative and poetic processes:

[...] the images [which] rose before [the poet] as *things*, rose up from somewhere. But they had, in the first instance [...] ‘flashed’ from *words*. And it is only through those words that we, in our turn, can arrive at them. Our sole hope, accordingly, of reconstituting any portion of the sleeping imagery which at the moment of the dream was susceptible of movement towards the light, lies again in an examination of the books which Coleridge had been reading. (*The Road to Xanadu*, 357)

The Road to Xanadu provides us with an almost complete list of Coleridge’s readings and constitutes an indispensable source for any student of Coleridge’s poetry; Robert F. Flissner’s more recent *Sources, Meaning, and Influences of Coleridge’s Kubla Khan*, helpfully completes the list and is also a necessary tool.

Lowes’s approach could seem Freudian – from the words to the dream –, but in considering that the images of the dream “‘flashed’ from words” (which, therefore, Coleridge had found elsewhere in the first place), he confused the material of which the dream was made with the motive force which brought it into existence and organized this material into its final shape.¹³

Naturally, what started the dreaming process and, in the case of “Kubla Khan” the poetic process, can only be found in the words of which the poem is made – as in a dream, this is indeed our only material –, but we must then remember, as I have just pointed out, that these words have two sides and must not be taken at their *apparent* face value: the words of the poem, yes, but with the knowledge that there is more in them than meets the eye or ear in as much as they carry what with Freud we can call unconscious desire. Here is our architect. Admittedly, we could not speak of this “force” if it had not left traces of its existence in our dreams, and in discourse more generally, but we shall not mistake the material it chose to organize into a dream or poem with the “primary” cause at the origin of such a choice. True, Coleridge “tells us what was before his eyes at the instant he fell asleep, and the poem begins with the actual words on which his eyes had closed” (Lowes, 358), but this leaves open the question of the reason why the poet was so impressed by the words he had just read. What must have happened – as in the case of all dreams in fact – was that a given sign, image(s) or word(s), signified or signifier, was “chosen” to give expression to a particular desire. For indeed, and this perfectly applies to literature, *what characterizes language is that the reason for its production can be read in it*. We have already met with the “formula:” the mask, though acting as a screen, also carries unconscious desire: *porte/masque*.

I realize that such an affirmation may seem to modify Freud’s presentation of the dynamics involved in the formation of a dream – since for him day’s residues can now and then be considered as having an active role to play at the outset –, but, as I have already tried to explain, the above formula does remain faithful to what is fundamental in the model he left us: the basic structure is the same, and this has a bearing on the way we can look at Lowes’s enterprise today. It may be that Freud, although he always

¹³ What is more interesting for us in Lowes’s statement, and quite valid this time, is the “movement towards the light” to which he refers: this does correspond to the movement of the metaphor, to the path followed by desire to get (masked) expression, it is the second transformation I mentioned above, the final text being a result of this “writing-work,” *travail d’écriture*. (Obviously, Lowes’s statement about images and words would benefit from a debate on Saussure’s *signified* and *signifier*.)

insisted that the role played by day's residues was secondary, gave them too much importance in spite of all, but his complete description of the forces at work in the construction of a dream amounts in the end to illustrating the encounter of an unconscious desire and of a sign. Several passages in *The Interpretation of Dreams* leave no doubt about this:

It will be seen, then, that the day's residues, among which we may now class the indifferent impressions, not only *borrow* something from the *Ucs.* when they succeed in taking a share of the formation of a dream – namely the instinctual force which is at the disposal of the repressed wish – but that they also *offer* the unconscious something indispensable – namely the necessary point of attachment for a transference [*Übertragung*]. (562)¹⁴

Another illustration by Freud of the relationship between desire and representation is the well known “analogy” which describes the relationship between the *entrepreneur* and the *capitalist* in the same section of *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

A daytime thought may very well play the part of entrepreneur for a dream; but the *entrepreneur*, who, as people say, has the idea and the initiative to carry it out, can do nothing without capital; he needs a *capitalist* who can afford the outlay, and the capitalist who provides the psychical outlay for the dreams is invariably and indisputably, whatever may be the thoughts of the previous day, a wish from the unconscious. (561)

In my own formulation, Freud's capitalist becomes the “architect,” and I wouldn't even say that his entrepreneur, from the point of view of psychoanalysis, has any initiative at all. “From the point of view of psychoanalysis” is a necessary restriction, for the simple reason that the sociological dimension of literature cannot be overlooked. In this perspective, day's residues come to be valued for themselves and can be considered as the representatives of history. A research on the historical significance of “Kubla Khan” is not our debate here, but there is no doubt that such an undertaking would have to start with Lowes's colossal enterprise. All that belongs to the romantic tradition in “Kubla Khan” is well known: this is where history played its part. Indeed, while carrying/concealing the desire of an individual subject, literature also bears witness of the time which has produced it: straight and easily legible or complex and metaphoric,¹⁵ it has its own sociological and historical meaning, a testimony which should not be confused with what discourse can tell us about the individual producer.

And what we can learn about the poet as the individual producer of a text, but also about the imaginative process, is to be found in the very words the author “chose” to construct his work with. As I have tried to show throughout, it does not make much difference whether Coleridge consciously chose the words of his poem or simply wrote what the dream dictated to him, what he remembered from it, because in both cases these words had already been submitted to a transformation, a transformation which had taken place within him, the dreamer-poet. It is such a transformation – necessary to the construction of a dream – that Freud managed to analyze, to untie and translate, revealing what must have preceded not only the account of the dream but the dream itself and beyond this the motive force at the source of the whole process of representation.

The psychoanalytic hypothesis – so often verified in each of us – is well known; I only mention it here to emphasize what relationship there exists between dream and language: just as our dreams, our

¹⁴ See also: “We learn from [the psychology of the neuroses] that an unconscious idea is as such quite incapable of entering the preconscious and that it can only exercise any effect there by establishing a connection with an idea which already belongs to the preconscious, by transferring its intensity on to it and by getting itself ‘covered’ by it.” (562)

¹⁵ Along the lines of a structure which is quite similar to the one used to illustrate the way the unconscious individual subject manifests desire – similar but not of the same nature, the remark is important, for the concept of unconscious only applies to the individual.

discourse, in its ambiguity, retains the traces of the desire which caused it to appear. This leads to the question we can now put to “Kubla Khan” at last: “behind” the words, what desire? Can a hidden core of feelings and affects be unveiled which will give the poem the coherence it seems to lack?

II

The words,¹⁶ then, and to begin with, those which recur most often in Coleridge’s poetic narrative. And instead of wondering where they seem to come from, as reminiscences of what the poet had no doubt read, let us try to understand *why* they were selected among many others. I have in the preceding pages given enough reasons – convincing arguments, I hope – not to have to justify the psychoanalytic interpretation on which we are now more specifically about to embark. Should some extra reassurance be needed, however, none other than John Livingston Lowes would provide it:

Attempt at symbolic interpretations of ‘Kubla Khan’ with no relation to dream psychology are common enough. They are for the most part (except to their only begetters) wildly improbable, and it does not fall within my purpose to discuss them. (596)

As is well known by now, in “dream psychology” the theory is that the analyst listens to the words of the patient with what Freud called “suspended, or evenly poised, attention” (*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*),¹⁷ and then waits for whatever associations these signs may give rise to in the patient’s mind or memory. In the case of a text written several centuries ago, however, there is no patient on the couch, and the psychoanalytical critic is left with a piece of discourse which, as we saw, “means what it says” but no more. Unless, of course, some logic can be found, some pattern which will give a new coherence to the text or, as in the case of “Kubla Khan,” replace an apparent lack of coherence, and help to account for the specific construction of the discourse under analysis.

Hence, the words: from the words of the poem to their likely origin in the (opium) dream. The analyst, this time, shall endeavor to discover what “links” may have drawn “together a chaos of elements into” what became “Kubla Khan,” (Lowes, 351)¹⁸ and try to establish what the poet’s dream could have been.

A rapid word-count gives the following results:

- WATER as element appears *nine times*: sacred river (3), sea, rills, fountain (2), ocean, waves,
- CAVE or CAVERN, *five times*, and I shall suggest we might want to add Abyssinian to the list,
- the suffix – LESS, *five times*: measureless (2), sunless, ceaseless, lifeless,
- DOME, of pleasure, in air, *five times*,
- the notion of ENCLOSING, girdled round, enfolding, and perhaps circle, *three times*,
- CHASM, so prominent (“that deep romantic chasm”) at the opening of the second *movement*, is repeated *twice*, while MILK, HONEY-DEW and PARADISE, although they only appear *once*, should also be mentioned, I think.

If we now consider the narrative proper and try to listen to it as a “dream psychologist” should, we might get a hint as to what to do with the recurrences in the vocabulary just pointed out above, parti-

¹⁶ Twice, the authenticity of these “words” have been the object of a discussion by Lowes. In the first edition of his *Road to Xanadu* (1927) he convincingly concludes the debate with: “[...] in point of fact there are no variants whatever” (354); the 1930 revised edition of his study repeats the affirmation in the “Addenda and Corrigenda” (See pages 604g-604h).

¹⁷ The notion may seem a vague one, of course, and it is true it describes an ideal attitude; we must however remember that psychoanalysis, as “conjectural science,” has a relationship to knowledge which is relative and paradoxical.

¹⁸ Lowes’s exact sentence is: “And so before threading the labyrinth ahead of us, I mean to recall, for light on our way later, the links which drew together a chaos of elements into shapes of sheer beauty” (351). As for “beauty,” it does not fall within the analyst’s purpose to discuss it.

cularly as they occur at different times in the narration (dome and gardens, chasm, dome and shadow). This narration, which develops in time, can be said to have a dramatic structure, and this causes us to begin with a discussion of the way the poem is divided into parts or stanzas. For when we look at the presentation of the text on the printed or written page, we find out there are several versions of the poem, at least as far as the number of parts are concerned. The 1816 version, which is the one which first appeared in print, has three, whereas the Crewe manuscript, supposedly of 1797, has two, and we know there have been editors who divided the poem into four stanzas.

The interest of the division into two parts, as in the Crewe manuscript, resides in the fact that it introduces a difference of status between the two parts, the first looking more like what “visited” the poet during his dream, while the rest, slightly shorter, could be taken for a conscious addition, though not really an interpretation. This indeed might well be the significance of such a division. But we could also have a “dream” in two parts, or two Acts, and *then* the more or less conscious addition. In fact, there is no way to tell and we must be content with a first long part – which I shall divide into two dramatic “moments” – and a sequel of twenty four lines which either formed part of the dream proper or were the result of an association to it, an afterthought directly related to the dream and therefore made of the same unconscious material. As for the degree of consciousness involved in the composition, the psychoanalytic critic needn’t take part in the quarrel since he is mainly concerned with the words of the poems and its general movement. The only thing we can be certain of is that there is an obvious difference between the first two “moments” of the narration and the last twenty four lines, if only because the subject of the narration appears in that third part active, at least in his wishes or regrets, and no longer an observer only.

If we examine the temporal structure, then, I take it we can distinguish three moments in the dream-poem, three tableaux representing the memory of what was dreamt or the associations it brought about, roughly: the palace and its gardens; the romantic chasm and the mighty fountain; the reconstruction, reproduction from another angle, of the dome of pleasure with the damsel and her dulcimer and “he” who has “drunk the milk of Paradise.”

Between these three main movements, themselves susceptible to be sub-divided, what relationship? If one accepts the hypothesis that a secret, invisible, thread runs through the various parts of which “Kubla Khan” is made, it can be the task of the analyst to discover what coherence unites these apparently disconnected images or tableaux, thus getting nearer to an understanding of the fantasy that was at the source of the actual dream, or even reverie, which in the end resulted in the written poem.

It is not too difficult to identify the first eleven lines of “Kubla Khan” as a representation of paradise: a *palace of pleasure* is being *built* and magnificent *gardens* complete the picture; on this all critics agree, if only because the poem ends with the word “Paradise,” a more than probable testimony of the influence of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* on Coleridge’s poem.¹⁹

With the hope that the exotic figure of the oriental ruler can later find a suitable place in the overall structure of the poem, I shall for the moment leave the interpretation of the opening line, and start with a feature I find easy to analyze. Kubla Khan’s palace, then, but Coleridge wrote “*dome*,” which is not so frequent to describe a palace or mansion, and then he added “*pleasure*” to it, which resulted in “pleasure dome.” My own spontaneous reading, focussing on “dome” or taking “dome” and “pleasure” as if it constituted a single unit, a single sign, saw a woman’s breast in the image and it is true that the idea of curved lines conveyed here may lead to such an interpretation: a dome susceptible to give me pleasure. Such a reading is an obvious one and has been made by some critics (House, 118; Flissner, 10), although others have deplored the simplicity of the interpretation (Schneider, 1975, 9-10; Fruman, 396):

¹⁹ This has been noted by most commentators; see for instance: “*Paradise Lost* [is] a poem that dominated his imagination for most of his life. The Abyssinian Kings and mount Amara appear in the fourth book of Milton’s epic, and this book was particularly well known to Coleridge [...]” (Norman Fruman, *Coleridge: The Damaged Angel*, 344.)

[...] the dome is breast-shaped, the caves are the womb and the river a fertility symbol [...] The attraction of this kind of criticism is that it becomes so easy once you get the knack of it. (Patricia M. Adair, 3)²⁰

Easy or not, too obvious, an interpretation is not to be judged by such yardsticks, but by the way it contributes to the construction of a coherent, plausible pattern. If the “pleasure-dome” were a breast – or simply a breast – what place would the Khan occupy in the picture? For it is he who had the “pleasure-dome” built, and then what are we to do with the “sacred river” and the “caverns” which follow close by? Many convincing interpretations have been offered of “caves” and of “caverns,” and they are often similar, but the place of this particular symbol within the general structure has not been really specified. However, to speak of an image of convexity (“dome”) followed by an image of concavity (“caverns”) may help us to arrive at a more satisfactory explanation (Shelton, 39; Flissner, 11). Indeed, if I study the six lines of the second part of the stanza, where fertility is mentioned and where grounds are “girdled” round, my own association is no longer with breasts but with the body of a pregnant woman. This is reinforced by the way the gardens on the seventh line are surrounded “with walls and towers,” although the specific words are “girdled round.” A fairly rare English word coming from the French may be of help at this point; I am referring to the word *enceinte*, whose definition is: “The space within the ramparts of a fortification.” This definition quite corresponds to “girdled round,” and we also know how a girdle is worn: it is “something that encircles as belt or zone” the dictionary says. “Walls and towers” may have to be interpreted, of course, but the general idea conveyed here does seem to be that of a mother to be – *une femme enceinte*. This would indeed account for the production of “dome,” and also of “fertile ground,” and perhaps of “blossomed” and “incense bearing-tree,” which are references to life. “Enfolding,” in any case, at the end of the stanza, somewhat resumes the idea conveyed by “girdled” and is one more argument in favor of the above interpretation. All this if we are to go by the 1816 published version of the poem, since we know that the Crewe manuscript has “*compass’d*” instead of “*girdled*,” and that “*compass’d*” can be considered as coming directly from Purchas’s “encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall.”²¹ I think it can safely be argued that the change from “*compass’d*” to “*girdled*” is significant and tells of an insistent unconscious desire.

Thus does the representation of Paradise assume a concrete dimension, from convexity to concavity: the pleasure-dome and its gardens can be considered as an image of life before birth.

Central to the unconscious fantasy, the secret presence of a pregnant woman suggests the imagined or reminisced happiness of “life” in the maternal womb, and perfect union. This might explain the luxuriance of the scenery – we are in a closed “space” where things grow –, and also the prevalence of water (river, sea, rills) in this first stanza, which can be interpreted as allusions to the prime source of life. No doubt over-determined, “Alph, the sacred river,”²² naturally finds its place in the tableau, evoking as it does the alpha, the beginning of all things, as of all the letters in the alphabet. As for “caverns,” in this context, exactly in the same way as the gardens are surrounded – and thus protected – with walls and towers, it can be said to be a place offering protection, a place inside which one feels safe, and indeed “girdled” and “enfolding” are not far from *containing*.

²⁰ See also, among others: “If rounded mountains always in human experience must mean breasts and caverns always wombs [...]” (Elizabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan*, 9-10.)

²¹ On the Crewe manuscript, see: T. Shelton and T. C. Skeat.

Here is Purchas’s text: “In Xaindu [or Xamdu] did Cublai Can build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall; wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightful streames and allsorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure [...]” Coleridge did not keep “beasts of chase and game”: could this be a sign that no one else but subject and mother were needed in the dream?

²² It may come from Milton and/or represent at once the Ganges and the Nile – which can be said to be “rivers of life” in fact –, but its presence in the poem can also be explained by its symbolic value, a general reference to origins. See Lowes (372), and also Flissner: “[...] the sacred river has also associations with the river Alpheus [...]” (11). (The latter mentions “J. B. Beer’s awareness that the term Alph has its affinities with the Hebrew *Aleph*, the first letter of the alphabet again [...]”)

The “musical” nature of this stanza, with such a play on repetition:

W a n a d u	K u b l a K h a n
d o m e	d e c r e e
r i v e r	r a n
s u n l e s s	s e a,

that is to say on a binary play on sounds, may well have its origin in this dream where infant and mother are one (one sound, two persons). But there is no certainty in this; I simply mention duality as a possible addition to the already existing stylistic commentaries of Coleridge’s poem.

Can we go as far as saying that the two phrases “measureless to man” and “sunless sea” allude to the absence of a third person – one thinks of the father, naturally –, making of this first part of the poem a “*scène à deux*” where infant and mother enjoy a moment of complete and ideal fusion? I take the insistence on *-less* as a sign that the presence of a third person is not desired. Psychoanalysis often sees in *sun* a reference to the father figure, whereas sea can be read as a symbol of what is maternal; in the phrase we are analyzing everything points to an unconscious wish to keep the father away. I realize such an interpretation may be considered as an over-simplification by many, but I have not found any other way to explain the meaning of this obvious presentation of a sea devoid of sun, a sea *without* the sun. This interpretation, besides, might help to explain the sacredness of the river “Alph.”

Still in the same line of interpretation, the insistence of the diphthong /ai/, repeated four times in the phrase “So twice five miles of fertile ground,” can be taken for a sign of the same desire to be alone with the mother, and marks the triumph of the infant, I, whom we can then consider as the unconscious subject of the fantasy on which the poem rests. We know that those “twice fives miles” are the result of a correction, since the Crewe manuscript has “Twice six miles” (which is nearer to the “sixteene miles” in Purchas’s *Pilgrimage*), and though euphony has undoubtedly gained by the modification there is no reason not to see an effect of desire in it, particularly as “twice” recalls the duality we have already noted.

The amorous face-to-face of mother and infant might now help us to interpret the first five lines of “Kubla Khan.” Should this interpretation be accepted, the symmetry noted above could then be taken as a representation of the “mirror stage.” Conjectural as it may be, such an analysis, I think, deserves to be mentioned; I shall simply insist on the fact that it is an hypothesis and as such does not imply any certainty.

Precisely because of this fusion between mother and child, however, the two opening lines of the poem now lend themselves to another interpretation, an interpretation which completes the one above in fact and is in no way contradictory to it.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree

If we accept the view that a fantasy of fusion constitutes the core of the first part of the dream-poem, we shall not be surprised to find out that the actual unfolding of the fantasy is quite simply preceded by a representation of conception: it is indeed the necessary condition of what is to follow and it was the *Khan*, after all, who erected the pleasure-dome!

a a u did u a a
decree

Coleridge's talent, no doubt, is responsible for such enchanting symmetry, but there is really no contradiction in reading it as an unconscious representation of the parental couple. And because of "did" and of "decree," in this couple where *Xa* stands opposite the repeated cutting sound of *K*, the powerful Khan may be seen as the active parent. Some critics, after all, in their attempt to make of "Kubla Khan" an unfinished work, have stressed the power of the oriental ruler: he is the one who "can," and stands thus in opposition to the son who proves incapable of finishing his poem (Adair, 137; Flissner, 8). Whether we are dealing with a fragment or on the contrary with a complete poem – which is the view I take –, this is in any case a convenient way to acknowledge the oedipal nature of the fantasy at work in "Kubla Khan."

In the end, what mainly matters is the thematic unity of this first "stanza." Palace and gardens form the two aspects – two again – of a single idea: life before birth as paradise. In this fantasy of fusion, the happy state when one is safely "held," "contained," does seem to have been the unconscious desire at the origin of this first moment of the dream-poem.²³

With the next "stanza," however, it seems such harmony is destroyed. The exclamation with which it opens dramatically heralds a change of mood and marks an interruption – "But oh!" The obvious "break" has been witnessed by all, although, it is true, there is no gap after the eleventh line in the handwritten Crewe manuscript.

In the first five lines of this second "movement," I feel the ambiguity gradually disappears: we have moved from Fusion, from the One, to the Two, as can be seen in the "woman wailing for her demon lover!" The "chasm" is "deep" but also "romantic," the "place" is "savage" but also "holy and enchanted," and the "waning moon" is "haunted." The One of the fusion of mother and child – they were two, but *in One* – has been replaced by the couple of lovers. The two principal actors, this time, play another part, and in this new scene the infant-to-be-born is only present as a witness.

I have analyzed a similar example of "primal scene" when interpreting the first line of "Kubla Khan," but this time there is a difference: whereas the first instance seemed to correspond to the unconscious meaning Coleridge gave to the phonetic opposition he read in the "Xaindu [or Xamdu]" / "Cublai Can" of Purchas's text, transforming it into a representation of conception, in the second instance, the love scene he describes is much more explicit, and sensuality is not absent from it ("savage," "demon-lover"). The infant, as I claim, is still the *subject* of the narrative we are studying, but it has no part in the amorous embrace it describes²⁴, and from the One to the Two it has suffered a loss of status. "Now there are three of us," the paternal voice says. This may be enough to explain the break we have felt – which I have felt at any rate – between what we can call the first and second stanzas of "Kubla Khan." And there is probably more in "chasm" than this.

Once again, the dictionary is very helpful: "**Chasm**: a cleft, a fissure, a rent, a yawning gulf," and also "a break in continuity." From cleft to yawning gulf: we have here the two sides of the signifier *chasm*. "Cleft," I read as a reference to the feminine body,²⁵ while "yawning gulf" makes me think of

²³ I have no serious explanation for "gardens *bright* with *sinuous* rills" (a phallic snake?) or for "sunny spots of *greenery*" (could this mark the presence of the son?). As for "forests *ancient* as the hills," could it be a reference to elders? "*Incense-bearing*" will be tentatively interpreted later as a preparation for a manifestation of anger.

²⁴ Naturally, the "child" who witnessed, and here reports, the "scene" may well have identified with one of the active participants, but if this may help to explain the ambiguity still somewhat present in the passage, it is nevertheless a secondary aspect of the situation, the essential pleasure being in seeing, or hearing, rather than in doing.

²⁵ Which means that "[...] which slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover," because of "slant" and of "cover," can perhaps be accepted as a representation of the *mons veneris*. Commenting, page 26, Suther's identification of "a cedarn cover" with pubic hair, Flissner finds the interpretation to be a "far-fetched association to most readers," but has nevertheless the merit of mentioning it. Reuven Tsur in his *The Road to Kubla Khan: A Cognitive Approach*, discusses this issue page 31. About the first part of the poem, Fruman writes: "[...] a pleasure-dome in the vicinity of 'caverns measureless to man' suggests far more the *mons veneris*, especially as we hear at once of 'fertile' grounds and 'forests,' almost classic symbols for primary sexual terrain." (396).

destruction, of loss of course, of castration, but also, more philosophically, brings about the idea dear to phenomenology, and central to modern psychoanalysis, of the utter estrangement of the subject, \S , that is to say the idea of an incommensurable distance between world and subject, Lacan's *real* in fact. The relationship between psychoanalysis and philosophy here becomes evident:

The schism which science had made between subject and object, man's consciousness and the surrounding world, Coleridge struggled all his life to close, both in poetry and in philosophy. (Adair, 7)

Such a structure – the two “sides” of the Freudian “bar” – is quite compatible with the idea that “sacred river” represents those forgotten memories which later reappear on the surface of our lives.

The “deep romantic chasm,” in the first line of this second stanza, may have retained some ambiguity – the object observed can also be desired by the subject –, but not so the second occurrence of the term. The word opens a scene of disruption – a rushing waterfall – not unlike an earthquake or a volcanic eruption: “ceaseless turmoil,” “half-intermittent burst,” “huge fragments” which vault “like rebounding hail,” “rocks” which are “dancing,” all this violently projected. In this second scene, the liquid element is still present, but I do not think it stands for the same object, at least for a while, as the one which ran sinuously and so peacefully through the bright gardens of the first stanza and which I identified as related to fertility and to the mother.

For the psychoanalyst, the details of such a scene of violence are not difficult to decipher, especially as they were preceded by an allusion to a “woman wailing for her demon lover” where we saw a representation of the primal scene. The various references to a liquid (“seething”), to respiration (“this earth in fast thick pants [...] breathing”), and the explicit “swift half-intermittent burst” form a vivid representation of the culminating excitement in the sexual act.²⁶ Is also present in the scene the violence imagined by the child who has reconstructed it or been a witness to it, for the “mighty fountain” is “forced.” But there is more, and the infant-yet-to-be, who can nevertheless have been a witness also, reconstructs the aggression he himself has suffered, the “primal scene” being this time experienced from the inside as it were.²⁷ This is in any case the only explanation I have for the apparition in the dream-poem of words such as “fragments” which vault “like rebounding hail,” and “chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail.” The forcibleness which is at the heart of these two lines – and “*thresher*” and “*flail*” are not without implying some violence – even acquires a quasi ontological dimension if one cares to look at the details of the scene: not only can “grain” be interpreted as a possible reference to conception, but the operation of threshing, by which the grain is separated from the original wheat, can be read as an unconscious allusion to the loss of fusion. Thus is Paradise lost, the child disturbed, and about to be thrown into the cold world: we are not too far from those readings which see a representation of birth, or of the Fall in the passage (Gerber, 327; Flissner, 20).

Was the violence witnessed, or suffered, so unbearable that it had to be followed by a moment of calm?

*Fives miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran.*

Can we interpret these repetitions, of sounds (*/ai/*, */m/*, */r/*) and images (meandering, mazy motion, wood and dale, sacred river), as signs of a yearning for a lost happiness, signs of a desire to *return* to

²⁶ I doubt whether such a representation was consciously devised and it is not possible to decide whether it was or not – these may well be images in a dream –, but what matters in the end is that the terms used in the description of a natural upheaval so perfectly correspond to the description of an orgasm.

²⁷ Although the issue he discusses is quite different, Freud, in “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” *Standard Edition* XVII, describes such a fantasy and also speaks of “a wish to be inside the mother's womb.” (582)

the peaceful atmosphere of the beginning? Or perhaps simply an attempt to deny the “scene”? The correspondence deserves notice. Could the play between /ai/ and /m/ be a reminder of the happy fusion of child and mother with which the poem started? Or should we simply speak of resignation, of submission to the Law? It is not possible to say. (And of course identification with one of the actors of the “scene” is always possible; in which case a lull after the sexual storm would be an acceptable reading; this is for each reader to decide.)

What is certain is that the passage conveniently introduces the last four lines of the “stanza.” So far, with the exception of “sacred river,” the images have been repeated but not the words, and I find significant that “caverns measureless to man” should be reproduced word for word, as opposed to the rest. And then “-less,” (“*devoid of, free from*”) is quite explicit. There seems to be some insistence, here, a strong desire, I think, to exclude the father from the scene: one wishes the maternal “caverns” to be out of reach for him, and this might explain “man.” Was *incense* in “incense-bearing tree” a preparation for this? Quite naturally, after the dual relationship with the mother comes the entry into the oedipal triangle.

I cannot tell why the “sacred river” is made to *sink* “in tumult to a lifeless ocean,”²⁸ but “this tumult” is also what Kubla hears:

And ‘mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

and I feel very much tempted to interpret the prophecy of “war” as expressing an aggressive oedipal wish (together with the anxiety that may result in the child: the menace aimed at Kubla producing “Ancestral voices” afterwards). This might explain why “fear,” which had first been written on the Crewe manuscript, was crossed by Coleridge’s hand and replaced by “far,” more innocuous and more difficult to interpret.

With the third stanza, the mood changes and the interruption, this time, seems indisputable. What is left of the dome of pleasure is now only a “shadow,” floating “midway on the waves,” and this first word curiously describes the scene as less real, more insubstantial even, than the actual dream that preceded it. The “fountain and the caves” are still here, perhaps also floating “midway on the waves,” but this “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice” is a “miracle,” and the word “vision” in a moment will appear. It is as if the dreamer, remembering he had a dream, were trying to recapture it, perhaps vaguely realizing that this could not be achieved. The conditional now becomes the prevailing mode: “Could I revive,” “I would build,” “And all [...] should see” or “cry.” True, now, the voice of the “subject” can be heard: suddenly it seems we are no longer in the dream itself, although, as a consequence, curiously, we may have lost some of the certainty, of the reality, of the previous lines. I imagine the poet abandoning himself to what has now become his *day-dream*, and hallucinating the images which had just visited him, trying in vain to reconstruct his experience with words (notice how he still uses the past tense). One can, of course, speak of a greater distance, now, between the poet and his dream, and even interpret this last part of “Kubla Khan” as a piece of conscious writing. Apparently acknowledging the nature of the first thirty lines of “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge repeats with some new words and images what he said was first dictated to him. A repetition – for it is not an interpretation –, it has nevertheless recourse to some additions in the vocabulary: *shadow, floating and midway, mingled, a miracle, a rare device*, and they could possibly – among other things – be taken as signs of a greater consciousness. No doubt, in this last part, *secondary elaboration* was even more active than in the rest of the poem – and I should perhaps speak of something like a *literary elaboration*, an attempt at remembering and translating, which

²⁸ Can we see in the sentence the mark of a desire of aggression towards the mother? Would she be considered as having betrayed the infant? After the “scene,” or after the child’s birth, is she deemed no longer worthy of interest? Or can we say that “lifeless ocean” refers to the mother after she has given birth? These are questions.

could be considered as the elaboration of the previous unconscious elaboration. For psychoanalysis, however, the difference is slight and we still have an elaboration where unconscious desire has been at work, with the “architect” we have already met still in control. In the end, this is another oneiric re-creation of Paradise.

The earthly paradise with its realistic fullness and matter-of-fact details becomes a fleeting vision, very much like a prenatal or otherworldly experience that the speaker is attempting in vain to recapture. (Tsur, 1987, 74)

What has changed, though, is that it is *another* representation, and this new representation does not claim to be other than it is. The dream, very likely, has left some traces in the vocabulary; we have recognized “fountain” and “caves,” and “float[ing] midway on the waves” may express a nostalgia for the maternal waters, while “mingled” may recall fusion, but these are only images of a past happiness, words, words... If dreams are under no other rule than that of the “Pleasure Principle,” it is the “Reality Principle” – after the “Fall” – that now dictates its law. Hence what we can read as the poet’s (perhaps not-so-conscious) acknowledgement that... it was only a dream... and that the dome will not be rebuilt.

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight ‘twould win me
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!

There are other signs, for language has not lost its privilege and still *represents*. Such is the symbolical dimension of human discourse. “In the 1816 version, notes Norman Fruman, the line ending with ‘dulcimer’ is the only unrimed line in the poem,” and he sees ‘Amora’ “as a disguise for ‘Amara,’” concluding that “from ‘Amora’ to ‘Abora’ was a single brilliant step [...]” (343) Was this “brilliant step” meant to provide a rhyme for “dulcimer”? What is certain is that the latter had to stay and I take this as proof of its importance. Although a “dulcimer” is a real instrument, I also read *sweet* and *mother* in it, and “sunny,” which we have already met, may come from *son*, while “Abyssinian,” because of *abyss*, could be a reminder of the “caverns” of the first part of the poem. Much has been written about “Mount Abora”, which was first “Amara” as in Milton, then “Amora,” to finally become “Abora” which is not without connoting the idea of origin (*-ab*), a reference to our beginnings. Thus are being repeated, with some slight modifications, the terms of the first two parts; the poet’s “vision” is now a reconstruction of what has been lost, and this is not simply the dream itself.

Could we say that because of this loss, precisely, what was once the object of the poet’s desire is now presented under quite a different light? I mentioned slight modifications – as if the poet were saying: “This is no longer a dream.” – , but there is a last addition that I have not yet mentioned and which could be of greater significance. Indeed, how can we explain “caves of ice” which all of a sudden appears in this last stanza? Was “hail,” in a context of violence, further up, a preparation for this? Coleridge wrote the word twice, each time accompanied by “sunny (pleasure-) dome.” Is this a way for the child, the son, to speak of what he has lived as an abandonment? Only the author as “patient” could tell, but the interpretation is tempting.

Such an interpretation would help to explain the production of the last seven lines of the poem, which to me, as a reader, constitute at first sight a very strange addition. And yet we must suppose – psychoanalysis insists – that there is a link somehow.

And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

Is there something of an elementary nature in *hearing*, in *seeing*, and in *crying*? Could the “caves of ice” be a symbolical portrait of the refusing mother?

The repeated exclamation still remains mysterious. What danger is here pointed out? One cannot

help, of course, remembering the words of the Wedding-Guest: "I fear thee, ancient Mariner!" and there may be an echo of this in "holy dread." At the close of this poem on fusion and loss, could this ghost-like apparition be an image of Death?²⁹ And it is true that the ancient Mariner was a witness to so many deaths and even encountered "The Night-mare Life-in-Death." We can only guess and what is to be feared will have to remain mysterious. I see in the passage a general reminder of our human condition and read the "flashing eyes" and the "floating hair" as allusions to lunacy. But the strange portrait can also simply express the despair of the forlorn infant, and it is just as tragic.

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

An obvious echo of Milton's great poem, the word which closes "Kubla Khan" also reveals the reason for such a choice. As do the last two lines: "honey-dew," "the milk of Paradise," this is what has been lost and shall not be recovered. "Kubla Khan" is a poem about separation and loss.

But we must go beyond a consideration on contents – not so difficult to analyze, after all, if the various images are taken one by one –, and try to find out if we can give a satisfactory answer to the question of the coherence of the whole narrative. This brings about the idea that, like a tale or story, "Kubla Khan" develops in time. If we look at the dramatic structure of the poem we can see that its different parts, three, I think, are organized in a temporal sequence. The sequence is easy to follow: after *fusion* with the mother and after the *loss of the One*, comes this *poetic re-creation* of what has been lost, this hope that the palace can be built again and the Abyssinian maid revived. With words. *Represent*, that is what language does, along with dream and hallucination. The first two parts were also made of words, of course, but those had been a translation of the images in the dream, a reminiscence, and possibly something like the faithful rendering of an experience. And now, when the subject expresses himself more audibly, "with music loud and long," and says "I," he recreates "in air" Kubla's "sunny" pleasure dome. "'Kubla Khan' is a poem about poetry." (Beer, 118)³⁰

This should make us realize what a strange "object" Coleridge's poem is, how literary in its nature, and how unique, how archetypal. "Kubla Khan" is a poem *about the poetic function* without any doubt, "a poem embodying some ideas about the power of art," (Fruman, 395)³¹ particularly if we understand this function as representation, discourse, *parole*. It is a poem about language, that is to say about man's ability to replace "things" with words, and it is not indifferent that the whole process of its production, of its writing, should have been set in motion by a dream.

Above and beyond the images and details of the narration, "Kubla Khan" expresses in its dramatic structure the very essence of the psychoanalytical discovery, even to its latest developments some two hundred years after the poem was written (or dictated by a dream): it is Freudian, Kleinian, and Lacanian. Fusion, loss, and recovery through hallucination, its three "Acts" constitute a superb metaphor of what modern psychoanalysis says of language. An *Urpoem* indeed, an archetype which tells us that the spoken word has the structure of the dream.

²⁹ Which incites me to venture the hypothesis that the "Abyssinian maid" could also be read as an image of death, an image of return to the mother's body. One cannot tell, of course.

³⁰ Here is John Beer's complete sentence: "Kubla's enterprise can itself be seen as an analogue of the poetic. In such terms, 'Kubla Khan' is a poem about poetry."

³¹ "[...] the poem's main subject is poetry." (J. Shelton, 41.) For Humphry House, in his *Coleridge*, (1953) "Kubla Khan" constitutes "a description, rounded and complete of 'the act of poetic creation'."

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