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“Poet Bonaparte”: Decrypting *Kubla Khan*'s Decree

Peter Hughes

Just as readers of classical texts have come to identify and even define allusion in terms of a twist given to an expected text or usual phrase,¹ readers of Coleridge may be able to identify his oscillations between figurative and literal meanings through a surprising or disruptive image or phrase. A turbid depth underlies the surface of the line “Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree.”² But this line is marked as well by an internal metaphor that transfers the scent of the flower to the smell of burning incense, and by the shift from incense to fruit implied by “bearing;” beyond which we could even note a further twist: trees that exude incense are rarely flowering trees. Verbal markers such as these are of course only a first warning sign, a way of alerting us to a depth or sunken world that underlies such a rhetorical shift. They no more tell us exactly what lies beneath the surface than a marker buoy tells a mariner the name of the ship that lies wrecked down below. But they tell us that something is there or that something is going on, and just as different buoys indicate different features – shoals, channels, lobster-pots – different verbal markers imply different kinds of allusive secrets. Knowing or guessing that there is a secret is not of course the same thing as knowing what it is, but it is a beginning.

Throughout his poetry and prose,³ Coleridge at once alerts his reader to the proliferation of secrets and conceals what those secrets are by inscribing

¹ Guy Lee, *Allusion, Parody, and Imitation* (Hull: University of Hull, 1971), esp. pp. 8-10.

² I have sounded some of those depths in “The Vocal Forest of *Kubla Khan*,” *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 68 (1994):231-247.

³ To lighten the weight of footnotes, references to Coleridge's texts (apart from the poems and letters) are made according to the *Collected Works* under the general editorship of the late Kathleen Coburn. The following abbreviations will be used:

BL S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (London and Princeton, 1983). *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* VII.

them as *cryptonyms*. This term, which means “a word that hides,” was devised by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their brilliant revision of Freudian analysis, most famously in their rereading of the Wolf Man’s dream.⁴ Their beginning was the recognition that the Wolf Man, whose nickname obliterated his actual name of Sergei Pankeiev, had recounted to Freud in German a dream that took place, or rather reached expression, in a polyglot mixture of Russian (his first language), English (his second, learned in childhood from his governess) and German (his third and the language of analysis). The crucial cryptonyms were understandably those that occulted the scenes of seduction that provoked his need for analysis, so that even the “grey wolves” he reports seeing in his dreams are his translation into German of the Russian for skirt and trouser openings, plackets and flies, he saw in witnessing the seduction of his sister by his father.

Abraham and Torok in effect decrypt the Wolf Man’s dream; all the more tellingly because they show that Freud’s interpretation, like so many of Coleridge’s texts, insists on a certain symbolic narrative even as it leads us away from other, usually less symbolic, codes and versions. The cryptonymic energy of Coleridge strikes the reader at every turn. He encodes parts of his Notebooks in ciphers, some childish transpositions (A=1, B=2), others transcriptions of Greek (ψευδο-poets), still others in a private shorthand. He even invokes the power of secret writing in his own terms: “Cryptographina, reveal unto me.” His own name becomes first Cold+ridge, then its Latin translation (Gelid+edri), and his own initials become the basis of a polyglot cryptonym. S.T.C. shifts first into Greek as ΣΤC, then expands into a rare and poignant hieroglyph – ΣυνΤαφοC – that means “buried together.” Coleridge and his love Sara (alias Asra) were in this cryptonym placed in the same crypt. In calling these signs cryptonyms,

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- CL *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs. 6 vols, (Oxford and New York, 1956-71).
- CM S.T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley, 5 vols. (London and Princeton, 1980). *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* XII.
- CN *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York, Princeton and London, 1957-).
- PW S.T. Coleridge, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. E.H. Coleridge, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1912).
- SMS S.T. Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual*, ed. R.J. White (London and Princeton, 1972). In S.T. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons. The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* VI.
- Watchman S.T. Coleridge, *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton (London and Princeton, 1970). *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* II.

⁴ *Cryptonymie: Le Verbier de l’homme aux loups* (Paris: Aubier Flammarion, 1976), p. 115.

Abraham and Torok wanted to call attention “to their allusion to an alien and occult meaning ... and their difference from a simple metonymic displacement.”⁵ What cryptonymy provides, in other words, is a theory of readability that does not define the act of reading but rather attempts to create avenues for reading and to discover markers where before there were none.

And not noticing the markers, not noticing the signs of concealment or secrecy, involves a loss of understanding; even worse, a loss of what Coleridge insisted was the value of poetry, its pleasure for the reader. As an example of a marker that points, a word that disquiets, we might look in *Kubla Khan* for the strange use or abuse of a noun or verb. Take for example the word that provokes the rhyme of “tree”; one of the strangest verbs in English poetry, the verb “decree.” It is in several senses the base on which the poem is structured, the word that authorizes its being.

In Xanadu did *Kubla Khan*
A stately pleasure-dome decree.

Now “decree,” used as it is here to mean something beyond “ordered the construction of,” strikes the reader as a strange use of a verb that had by Coleridge’s time, and still in ours, the sense of a legal or executive order. To use it as Coleridge does, as though to decree is to build or create, presents a problem that has usually been resolved by reading the verb rhetorically, as the telescoping of an expression that would include or implode the notions of commanding, commissioning, and supervising the building of the pleasure-dome and, as we learn a few lines later, the park that surrounds it:

So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round.

This reading makes allegorical sense of the verb, especially if we recall its Miltonic and Shakespearean range, and it also makes partial sense of an elliptical notebook entry, “... Poet Bonaparte Layer out of a World-garden.—” (CN I 1166), whose connection with *Kubla Khan* has often been noticed. Or half-perceived, since the laying-out of the garden has been related to the poem more clearly than the odd phrase “Poet Bonaparte.” To grasp this figure we need to see that it is even more elliptical than it looks, and that

⁵ *Ibid.*

what it omits is a literal reference, a missing middle term that links the poet, the revolutionary general, and the Tartar Khan.

To take the third first, we can confirm through *The Watchman* and the *Notebooks* that some of Coleridge's allusions to Tartar khans spring from sources much closer at hand than the travels of Marco Polo or the pilgrimages of Purchas. One of many reports in *The Watchman* of contemporary upheavals in Central Asia shows that Coleridge adapted and invented accounts that provided historical and Aesopian parallels to the struggle against tyranny then going on in revolutionary western Europe: "Lof Ali is returned with the wreck of his army to Kerman; from whence he has sent to the Kan of Mazandarn, ordering him to collect some troops, and march against Ghilan, and attack the Usurper before the promised reinforcements from Russia are received" (*Watchman* 71). As this report goes on it expands such references to Russia so that the reader by the end reads *through* the dispatch a second report that is yet another of Coleridge's attacks on Czarist tyranny and the immoral behavior of the Empress Catherine. Her insatiable appetite for power and pleasure made her a perfectly indefensible target of left-wing satire; in this case a parabolic satire that strikes at the corruption and war-mongering of other *anciens regimes* ("ancestral voices prophesying war!") leagued against revolutionary France *through* the attack on Catherine's Russia and its allies and satraps among the khans of Tartary. Later in *The Watchman* Coleridge renews the attack by recounting the sack of Kerman, stronghold of Lof Ali (alias Lufty Ally Khan) by his tyrannical opponents. The sadism that flickers through the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* blazes up in the poet's description: "For seven days was the town delivered to the pillage of a rapacious cruel soldiery. To add to the horrors of this work of rapine, the tyrant, in order to execute his vengeance upon the most obnoxious, directed the *extraction of their eyes*; and so many are said to be the victims, that it is calculated two maunds of *human eyes* were the fruits of this diabolical command" (*Watchman* 114). The early notebooks in their turn show that *Kubla Khan* may be an allusion to an even more ambivalent history, that of a contemporary Khan who is at once literate, embattled and in league with Russia: "In the year 1783 the Tarter Chan, Schapin Gueray, who had been driven out of his dominions by his Subjects, & reinstated by the Russian court, set on foot a Translation of the Great French Encyclopaedie in the Tartar Language" (*CN* I 424). Note the triple relation of Tartar Khan, Russian Court, and French Enlightenment; taken together, they give a

context to “decree” that makes it swerve toward Aesopian or even satirical reference.

Satire and fable have in common a range of meaning that lies or at least aims outside the text. More than an historical narrative, which confirms its validity as an account of the world through references, not to events, but rather to an archive of sources and texts that replace the order of events, satire and fable reflect through distortions a world of events and beings that is held to be actually there, projected outside the text against the wall of events, shadows that cannot be recognized until they appear on the cave of reality. By a paradox we all respond to in reading *Gulliver's Travels*, say, or *Animal Farm*, the rhetoric of the work serves to project references to a world outside literature; the pigs of the beast-fable both distort and define human figures and historical events, and the anagrams of Swift – “Langden” and “Tribnia” – at once hide and reveal the names of England and Britain. So too in *Kubla Khan* the verb *decree* hides and reveals the subversive bond that exists between the poet and Bonaparte. Here too the clue that leads the reader outside the text is a word that seems alien or *unheimlich* in this text because it is too much at home in another text, in another language.

Throughout *The Watchman*, Coleridge leans on texts that record the decrees of the French *Directoire* and the dispatches of Bonaparte, then the young and victorious general commanding the Army of Italy. Coleridge reports that “the Council ... passed the following decrees” (*Watchman* 290) and reprints in translation the address of “The Executive Directory to the French Armies – ” (*Watchman* 321-22). Soon after he adds Bonaparte’s own dispatch announcing his victory over the Austrians at Montenotte in April of 1796, a dispatch sent back to the Directory in Paris (*Watchman* 323-25). There was of course nothing innocent about this: by broadcasting the decisions of the revolutionary government Coleridge was making known what Pitt was trying to keep from being reported. Even more, by reprinting in such detail Bonaparte’s own accounts of French victories, he seemed to welcome and admire revolutionary triumphs that were a pointed contrast to a series of British and reactionary defeats. And although Napoleon the Emperor became in time and in Coleridge’s later Notebooks a figure of tyranny (*CN* III 3866), General Bonaparte seemed to him the embodied triumph of republican principles. Coleridge was determined to discover or invent such triumphs wherever he could, and even an incident about the suicidal attack on a Russian officer in Poland closes with words that compress an attack on Russia and Catherine with a parable for

England: "Tell the Czarina, before whom you only crawl and cringe, that Poland still contains Republicans" (*Watchman* 114).

Precisely because this account refers and alludes to events outside literature in this parabolic way, it becomes "undecidable" in both the deconstructive sense of the term and in the further sense that all ironic and Aesopian discourse is undecidable or deniable. The Aesopian and ironic tropes that dominate *The Watchman* have in common with allusion the power to destabilize or make rhetorical any story or discourse that is being read in a referential way. Any reading of *Animal Farm* that recognizes references to Marx, Trotsky, and Stalin can be unsettled by the reminder that it is a story about pigs called Major, Snowball, and Napoleon. Allusion, as Du Marsais recognized, is a trope closely linked to the duplicity of both allegory and puns: "Les *allusions* et les jeux de mots ont encore du rapport avec l'allégorie: l'allégorie présente un sens, et en fait entendre un autre: c'est ce qui arrive aussi dans les allusions, et dans la plupart des jeux de mots, *rei alterius ex alterâ notatio*. On fait allusion à l'histoire, à la fable, aux coutumes; et quelquefois même on joue sur les mots...."⁶ Its references become deniable, and Coleridge depended for his safety from prosecution on his ability to deny that anything could be read into such reports and incidents beyond the events they recounted.

Their meaning, like Xanadu's pleasure-dome, cannot be decided except by decree. Submerged in the word itself are its French origins, which account for part of its strangeness to an English ear. Coleridge had as we have seen read many of the decrees promulgated by the revolutionary government, and I hear behind the verb in *Kubla Khan* decrees such as this: "La Convention nationale, après avoir entendu le rapport du Comité de salut public, Décrète...."⁷ Another that seems closer to the building or creation by decree runs "La Convention Nationale, sur le rapport de ses comités d'instruction publique & des monumens, décrète ce qui suit..."⁸ and what it decreed was a "Musée de la République." The past tense of the poem's opening may be yet another way of distancing its origins, of concealing its beginnings in translated revolutionary decrees rather than in the baroque English prose of *Purchas his Pilgrimage*. But it may also be a way of alluding to the style of a royal or despotic decree, which is usually expressed both in the past and in the present tense. Bourbon and

⁶ *Traité des Tropes* (Paris: Le Nouveau Commerce, 1977), p. 135.

⁷ 22 prairial an II (10 June 1794), Archives de France AE II 1406. This and the following decrees are part of the collection in the Archives Nationales in Paris.

⁸ Archives de France AE II 3069.

Napoleonic decrees alike began with the formula “Nous avons décrété et décrétons ce qui suit.” This formula masks a duplicity of meaning that exalts both such a decree and such a poem. The shift of tenses reminds us that a decree promulgates or articulates in the present a decision taken in the past. This pattern of repetition through words of a prior creative act is both the interior design of *Kubla Khan*'s verse section and the pattern that Coleridge tries to present as the relation between that verse and the events alleged in his preface. The double meaning of decree is also and even more the repetition asserted in the *Biographia Literaria* as a definition of the imagination: “the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (*BL* I 304). It is even possible, given Coleridge's passion for puns and prepositions, that *decree* may implode further word-play on “descry,” which shares its etymological root and extends its range of meaning to include the proclaiming of what has been discovered or perceived. More probable is a play on “decreate,” a false etymology that tells a truth about Coleridge's view of poetry as a “reduction” of language to its metaphorical origins.

And yet these origins, like *Kubla Khan* and poetry itself, must remain inviolate, transnatural, and mysterious. What is worth understanding is not expressible in clear and simple language; the symbolic truth of things must remain veiled, dreadful, and vague. Coleridge found this quality of the origin, of darkness visible, in Greek and Latin more than in modern tongues; in German and English more than in French. “The elder Languages fitter for Poetry,” reads an early notebook entry, “because they expressed only prominent ideas with clearness, others but darkly – Therefore the French wholly unfit for Poetry; because is clear in their Language – ” (*CNI* 383). This same entry goes on to make a more general point that follows from the nature of poetic language: “poetry gives most pleasure when only generally & not perfectly understood.” A long tradition of definitions of poetry that goes back to Horace's *Ars Poetica* might lead us to oppose “truth” to “pleasure” in distinctions such as this; as though the gain in pleasure through uncertainty involves a certain loss of truth.

Coleridge himself suggests this in naming the attainment of pleasure (as opposed to truth) as the distinctive purpose of poetry in his essay on *The Principles of Genial Criticism* and in Chapter Fourteen of the *Biographia Literaria*: “A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth....” (*BL* II 13). He approaches this definition through a crabwise attack on erotic poetry because it gives a transnatural kind of pleasure that verges

on ethical pain or even physical revulsion: “Blest indeed is that state of society, in which the immediate purpose would be baffled by the perversion of the proper ultimate end; in which no charm of diction or imagery could exempt the Bathyllus even of an Anacreon, or the Alexis of Virgil, from disgust and aversion!” (*BL* II 12). These are both poems that celebrate homosexual love, and in attacking them Coleridge uses precisely the symbolism of smells and flowers whose significance we have seen in relation to the figure of the “incense-bearing tree” – “A fine writer of bad principles, or a fine Poem on a hateful Subject, such as the Alexis of Virgil or the Bathyllus of Anacreon, I compare to the Flowers and Leaves of the Stramonium – the Flowers are remarkably sweet, but such is the fetid odor of the Leaves that you start back from the one thro’ disgust at the other – ” (*CN* III 4198). The immediately following entries in the *Notebooks* offer what may be glimpses of the “hidden Vice” that excites Coleridge and “urges” him on (*CN* III 4166), of the hidden evil of symbolism. His “disgust” at homoerotic poetry leads directly on to “The Lanugo on a beautiful young man’s cheek and upper lip – compare to the blossoms pushing out from the Thistle – ” (*CN* III 4199). The homoerotic undertones of this description take on a new resonance and relation to *Kubla Khan* once we consider the meaning of “Lanugo” and of the comparison it prompts Coleridge to make. The word, according to OED, means “Fine soft hair or down,” and his botanical comparison is confirmed by a dictionary citation of 1677 (“The lanugo seen upon a Peach, Quince, or the like”). But the most nearly contemporary example of the word’s use given in OED suggests a possible link with the poison-tree itself: “A Monchineel-apple falling into the sea and lying in the water will contract a lanugo of salt-petre” (from “Miscellaneous Essays” in the *Annual Register* for 1766, 192/1). The last of these entries, all of which date from 1814, consists of six lines of Coleridge’s own verse, the first three of which run, “Zephyrs, that captive roam among these Boughs, / Strive ye in vain to thread the leafy maze, / Or have ye lim’d your wings with honeydew?” (*CN* III 4200).⁹ Just as these lines invert honey-dew into bird-lime, the preceding “Lanugo” entry inverts Coleridge’s “disgust” into a transnatural attraction.

What we have uncovered in *Kubla Khan* suggests that the deeper ambivalence may have been between pleasure and pain. Coleridge did after

⁹ In a sensitive note to this entry, Kathleen Coburn comments, “For once EHC’s gloss, ‘A bliss to be alive,’ seems wide of the mark. One catches rather here the ‘I see, not feel, how beautiful they are’ mood of *Dejection* – ‘Unfelt ye murmur ...’ together with the *Work Without Hope* sentiments, linked at midpoint (invertedly) with the honey-dew of *Kubla Khan*, this time not nourishing him but liming the wings of the breezes of inspiration?”

all insist, as we have seen, that he had his whole life long “been always preyed on by some Dread,” and pleaded on his own behalf, “perhaps all my faulty actions have been the consequence of some Dread or other on my mind / from fear of Pain, or Shame, not from prospect of Pleasure” (CN II 2398). The “holy dread” named in *Kubla Khan* as the response to vision is disturbingly close to the unholy fear that drives him on into the guilty visions of opium and the nightmares of impotence. And since the dream’s only truth is the account the dreamer narrates after the imagined fact,¹⁰ the language of dreams merges into the language of poetry. Or rather, dreams have no language of their own, but rather a rhetoric of fiction projected backward on an experience that only survives as a story or poem.

Coleridge’s prefatory stress on the fragmentary and deluded nature of *Kubla Khan’s* verse (“a psychological curiosity”) has distracted our attention from the artful fictions that shape the story told in the preface. They closely resemble the fictions adopted by earlier poets offering a piece of recent work as unfinished or inadequate or interrupted. Coleridge may even have found a model in Pope’s preface and opening lines of the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* (“a sort of bill of complaint”), which prefigures *Kubla Khan* by presenting the poet as harassed by intruders. As a fiction, the “person from Porlock” may well be an allusion to the poetasters that besiege Pope at Twickenham: “Shut, shut the door, good John! (fatigued, I said) / Tie up the knocker, say I’m sick, I’m dead.” And both works, though for very different reasons, are allegedly wrested from the poets’ hands and published against their wishes and better judgment. Artful dodges such as these should also be seen as part of a performative theory of literature, one that works out the implications of the fact that every text is written for a purpose, however involuted, and according to strategic principles.

In *Kubla Khan* two such principles are at work and at odds with one another: the modest or masochist self-presentation we have just considered, and a mode of self-deception that underlies the poem’s “powerful rhymes,” the superb narrative and lyric metres that contradict the preface’s diffidence. This metrical action creates confidence, but confidence in what? In decrees and spells that are irrefutable precisely because they are superstitious.¹¹ Coleridge anticipates here the metrical self-deceptions of Victorian poets, the deliberately obtuse mastery that led Auden to say of

¹⁰ See Norman Malcolm, *Dreaming* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 54-69.

¹¹ Nicolas Abraham elsewhere explores the cryptonymic function of metre in an analysis that is based on two poems that anticipate and echo Coleridge’s incantatory and superstitious rhythms – Goethe’s “Der Zauberlehrling” and Poe’s “The Raven”: see Abraham and Torok, *L’Ecorce et le noyau*, rev. ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), pp. 108-119.

Tennyson that he had the best ear of all English poets, but was unfortunately also the stupidest. But Coleridge's self-deception is also a throwback to the pretence enjoined by Pascal as a twisty path toward belief, one practised by earlier Christians: "Do as they initially did: it was by pretending they believed, by taking holy water, by having masses said, etc. Naturally even that will make you believe and you will grow stupid."¹² Metre, like self-fulfilling prophecy, makes a truth of consequences. But Coleridge was tormented by his awareness that the origins of that performative truth are ignorance and pretence. His divided self and the double strategy of *Kubla Khan* anticipate Tennyson's vain belief, but they also anticipate the scepticism of Clough's *Amours de Voyage*: "Action will furnish belief, – but will that belief be the true one?"¹³

The *Notebooks* show that the deepest source of dread and pain is the dream-life that surfaces transfigured as "the poet's reverie" in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or as the "vision in a dream" of *Kubla Khan*, subtitles that should be read both figuratively and literally. Coleridge balanced the pleasures of vision against the pains of nightmare by tacking on a further poetic "fragment," *The Pains of Sleep*, as a tail-piece to *Kubla Khan* when it first appeared in 1816: "As a contrast to this vision, I have annexed a fragment of a very different character, describing with equal fidelity the dream of pain and disease." This is the *third* poetic fragment in *Kubla Khan*, whose central panel is what we know as the poem and whose first panel is a passage from another of Coleridge's poems, *The Picture*; or, *The Lover's Resolution*, that is actually reproduced in the preface:

"The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon
The visions will return! And lo! he stays:
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more
The pool becomes a mirror."

Read one after another, the panels or fragments show three fates of poetry that originate in vision or reverie, and each fate is worse than the last. These lines from *The Picture* promise the restoration of lost vision, *Kubla Khan* decrees then decreates its "vision in a dream," and *The Pains of Sleep* despairs of escaping from nightmare apparitions. All three

¹² Cited from the *Pensées* by Mette Hjort in her innovative approach to these questions: see *The Strategy of Letters* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 196-233.

¹³ In *Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 308.

fragments are the strongest kinds of self-allusions – self-quotation – and all three posit an origin in visions of which they are themselves the sole survivors. And as a triptych they can be read as an allegory of the oscillating or undecidable status of the literary text. We pass between the rhetorical cast of *The Picture*, where experience is figured into pools and mirrors; *Kubla Khan*, where symbols transfigure both the literal and the literary into their opposites (“*Opposita semper unigena*”) in the ways we have seen; and *The Pains of Sleep*, where rhetorical figures fall away and the poet lies exposed, like the dreamer in Fuseli’s *The Nightmare*, to horrors that are both literal and, like him, transnatural:

Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
 Which all confused I could not know
 Whether I suffered, or I did:
 For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
 My own or others still the same
 Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.

(*PW I 390*)

The literal and subjective twist of these lines does not make for greater truth or better poetry than the figurative implosion of *Kubla Khan*, but many entries in the *Notebooks*, including some in code, suggest that the wound Coleridge exposes in the poem’s bathetic last couplet, “To be beloved is all I need, / And whom I love, I love indeed” is not altogether symbolic. The *Notebooks* also admit the common source of psychic and creative states prised apart and treated as opposites in much of his critical theory. *Kubla Khan*’s preface and fragments separate and describe, as though they were different kinds of dreams and trances, states of awareness that are disturbingly like waking and thinking. Even the opium vision in which the poem “had been originally, as it were, given to him” note the vague claim of inspiration that is a further denial of conscious composition – is and is not quite sleep: “The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses....” The last qualifying phrase betrays a little disquiet about the attempt made throughout the preface to distance and dissociate the poet from his poem by suggesting that he transcribed a dream. Disquiet turns in several notebook entries into the recognition that his most terrifying nightmare visions appear when he is between sleep and waking. They are more day-dreams or reveries, like one that terrified him with claw-like talons reaching in between his bed-curtains and led him to admit: “In short, this Night-mair is not properly a Dream;

but a species of Reverie" (CN III 4046). Just as symbolism is tainted by the transnatural, by a touch of hidden evil, poetry is tinged by delusion and superstitious fear wearing the mask of dream and romance.

Coleridge came close to saying this in so many words when he described vision as "the power of acting on a *delusion*, according to the Delusion, without dissolving it / Carry this on into a specific disease of this Kind – Prophets, & c – "(CN III 3280). But just as the transference that occurs in symbols subverts attempts to assign them meaning, it intensifies and implodes our response. We have seen how the symbolism of smells gains power by recognizing that this fragrance and that stench share a common origin. Recent studies suggest that the oscillating and undecidable language of literature has a further parallel in the contraries and transfigurations of color symbolism. As Michel Pastoureau has shown in relation to medieval painting and heraldry, each color gains impact precisely through its ambivalence; and more generally "It appears evident that all colors are not only ambivalent, but the same color may even symbolize a virtue and its opposite vice at the same time. Thus, for example, white expresses at the same time hope and despair; blue, science and stupidity. In addition, the same idea can be represented by many different colors."¹⁴ It has often been said that Coleridge's immersion in metaphysical speculation led him to abandon poetry. It has less often been noted that he suffused his later philosophical and theological writings with the darkness visible of the symbolic and allusive thought we have traced through *Kubla Khan*. Such patterns of writing involve a double movement of the text; outward in what seems an uncontrollable excess of allusion and word-play, inward through an unstoppable invasion of the text and implosion of its symbols through nonliterary meaning and transfigured reference.

We are left with a final paradox that may be a truth of art. That *Kubla Khan*, so often read as "pure poetry," evokes that reading precisely because it is so over-determined and over-charged with self-allusion and impure prose. And that Coleridge's obsessive concern for originality, for what we can now recognize as an excess of undetected allusion, made of *Kubla Khan* the first poem to attain what Rosalind Krauss has described as the

¹⁴ "Vizi e virtù dei colori nella sensibilità medioevale," *Rassegna* 7 (September 1985): 5-13, 12.

status of a modern work of art: "the condition of the multiple without an original."¹⁵

¹⁵ *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: M.I.T. Press, 1985), p. 187.