Coleridge and the Romantic Ideology:  
“Kubla Khan” and the Later Poetry

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The English discourse of Romanticism is closely bound up with its German exchange, one that for Coleridge assumes an explicit activity of translation, such as that of finding for Einbildungskraft a properly English idiom. For Coleridge, the German point of departure is of course Kant, for whom the imagination holds out the promise of bridging reason and sense, establishing a link between world and mind. In The Critique of Judgment the imagination is situated between the mind’s faculty of reason, the noumenal domain of concepts, and the phenomenal world of sensory perceptions. Translating German idealism into an English version, Coleridge explored the faculties of reason and understanding and created his own theory of the imagination to oppose to his Zeitgeist. The Zeitgeist here means Jacobinism represented by the French Revolution, utilitarianism and rationalism penetrating commerce and politics such as that represented by Parliamentary reformation. As for the French Revolution, in particular, Coleridge became suspicious about the expectation of the Revolution in 1796 and absolutely lost it after France invaded Switzerland in 1798. This sense of disillusionment and disappointment with the Enlightenment of his age inclined him to devote himself to German Idealism which was developed in the introspective world of “Idea” and explored the working of reason to reach the “Idea.” The “Idea” is the dynamic, organic and productive “One Life” penetrating world and mind. Combining the poetic imagination with the power of reason, Coleridge created a poetic ideology, the Romantic ideology through poet-
ry. His theory of the imagination is ideological because it is conceived as the fundamental necessity of a representation of the social, i.e., what John B. Thomson, following Marx, calls the necessity for a society to “forge a representation of its unity.” It addresses the fissures of the social and governs the attempted representation. His poetry was articulated as the countermeasure Coleridge upheld to overcome his Zeitgeist. His theory of the imagination could be made to resolve what Coleridge recognized to be a divisive historical antagonism at the heart of English society. His philosophical and poetic concept is intimately bound up with political institutions. As he tried to make ideas and beliefs that had no prior empirical status by way of language’s power to posit or to institute come into existence, poetry is crucial to understanding the ideological activity of the imagination in Coleridge, not merely as a practical example of his theoretical speculations but also—in the case of “Kubla Khan” and the later poems—as a theoretical medium of its own, a medium that sheds lights on the working of ideology.

In the beginning of The Statesman’s Manual (1816) Coleridge writes about the resemblance between the biblical scribes and poets. Both understood the necessary interdependence of knowledge and belief. In this sense they completely differ from Enlightenment minds such as Hume’s. Coleridge deplores “this historian’s cool systematic attempt to steal away every feeling of reverence for every great name by a scheme of motives” and continues as follows:

...histories incomparably more authentic than Mr Hume’s (nay, spite of himself even his own history) confirm by irrefragable evidence the aphorism of ancient wisdom, that nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. For what is enthusiasm but the oblivion and swallowing up of self in an object dearer than self, or in an idea more vivid?...in the genuine enthusiasm of morals, religion, and patrio-
tism, this enlargement and elevation of the soul above its mere self
attest the presence, and accompany the intuition of ultimate prin­
ciples alone. Every principle is actualized by an idea, and every idea is
living, productive...and...containeth an endless power of
semination.4

Thus Coleridge insists that an idea or a principle precedes historical
presence and the human quest for knowledge and understanding has to
bring “the whole soul of man into activity.”5 He grasps knowledge and
understanding as a social rather than an abstract pursuit. In this respect
he already argues what we would now call “ideology,” that is, a coherent
or loosely organized set of ideas which is the expression of the special
interests of some class or social groups. According to OED, the word “ide­
ology” appeared for the first time in Monthly Review XX. 569, 1796. The
word was defined as “the philosophy of mind” or “the science of ideas”
which was “distinguish[ed]...from the ancient metaphysics.” Marx and
the Marxist tradition would later identify “ideology” as fundamentally
economic, and would represent the social structure of Coleridge’s “whole
soul of man” as an interdependence of superstructure and infrastructure.
From a Marxist perspective it was imperative to criticize and explore
“ideology” as a nexus of false consciousness, while Coleridge’s position is
a defense of “ideology.” It is significant, however, to note that Coleridge
had already paid attention to the social attribute of knowledge, that is,
the concept of ideology which started to be in use by the end of the 18th
century.

The human quest for knowledge and understanding has to bring “the
whole soul of man into activity,” and this involves the enthusiastic pur­
suit of truth. It can be done only by poetry and the poets who produce it.
This is nothing but Coleridge’s Romantic Ideology, that is, the ideology of
poetry. Coleridge defines the poet and the creative imagination in Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria* as follows:

The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul (*laxis effetur habenis*) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities... (*BL.* II. ch. 14, 15-6)

What Coleridge explores in *Biographia Literaria* is that only a poet and his works can transcend a corrupting appropriation by the world of politics and money and with the power of imagination overcome the split and disharmony of history. He goes on to say that “poetry as poetry is essentially *ideal*."

I adopt with full faith the principle of Aristotle, that poetry as poetry is essentially *ideal*, that it avoids and excludes all accident; that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be representative of a class; and that the person of poetry must be clothed with generic attributes, with the common attributes of the class; not with such as one gifted individual might possibly possess, but such as from his situation it is most probable before-hand, that he would possess. (*BL.* II. ch. 14, 45-6)

Coleridge's view is to take from history its accidentality by idealizing it through poetry. What he tries to do is to idealize and conceptualize the reality through poetic imagination. The more separated the ideas and
concepts he tries to abstract are from the reality, the more desperately
the imagination has to "struggle to idealize and to unify" history. This
imagination is precisely the "secondary imagination" he identified as fol-
lows:

It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this
process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggle to
idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as
objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (BL. I ch. 13, 304)

Forest Pyle argues about this definition of the "secondary imagination"
as follows: "...we should read the passage because it is more than an
expression of a particular aesthetic ideology: within the vocabulary of
Romanticism, it is an investigation of the structure of ideology itself."
As an "esemplastic" power, the "secondary imagination" is assigned an ideo-
logical project to balance or reconcile "opposite or discordant qualities" of
historical contradictions. Thus his theory of poetry is a countermeasure
against the Enlightenment penetrating the politics and economics of his
age. Therefore his theory of poetry can be named as an "ideology of poet-
ry," and is the supreme idea as the essential foundation of his knowledge
and existence. Behind his belief in poetry as the sole measure to grasp
the eternal "One Life" is a strong sense of loss, separation and disap-
ointment at the secular world of his age.

From this sense of loss, disillusion and disappointment at his age did
he turn to the introspective idealism of Germany. Coleridge was deeply
influenced by Kant who appeared in the begininning of German Idealism.
Therefore Coleridge's theory of poetry has this philosophical foundation
of German Idealism. As his theory of poetry, that is, the ideology of poet-
ry, however, was enclosed within this introspective system of idealism, it
cannot escape from the following criticism by Marx of German Ideology. Marx maintains in *The German Ideology* that it turns the world upside down and sees it from a false vantage point because its own point of reference is conceptualized within a closed idealistic system:

Once the ruling ideas have been separated from the ruling individuals and, above all, from the relations which result from a given stage of the mode of production, and in this way the conclusion has been reached that history is always under the sway of ideas, it is very easy to abstract from these various ideas "the Idea," the thought, etc., as the dominant force in history, and thus to consider all these separate ideas and concepts as "forms of self-determination" of the Concept developing in history. It follows then, naturally, too that all the relations of men can be derived from the concept of man, man as conceived, the essence of man, Man. 7

Marx clearly criticizes the abstraction of "the Idea" because it conceals the reality and history and the truth about social relations. Coleridge insisted in his theory of poetry that "it avoids and excludes all accident; that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be representative of a class; and that the person of poetry must be clothed with generic attributes, with the common attributes of the class" (*BL*. II. ch. 14, 46). And the secondary imagination which works in his poetry "struggle[s] to idealize and to unify" the reality to take from it its accidentality. Furthermore, as Coleridge stated that "the poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity" with the power of imagination, he explicitly pointed out the social aspect of his theory of poetry, that is, the ideology of poetry.

Friedrich Engels criticizes German Ideology in *Ludwig Feuerbach* as follows:
The German Ideology is an occupation with thoughts as with independent entities, developing independently and subject only to their own laws. That the material life-conditions of the persons inside whose heads this thought process goes on in the last resort determines the course of this process remains of necessity unknown to these persons, for otherwise there would be an end to all ideology.  

Both Coleridge's ideology of poetry and the German Ideology are meant to idealize reality and thus are in danger of producing illusions separated from the reality. These are synthetic programs whose centers have been shifted from rational inquiry to imaginative and speculative pursuits. The ideas from which these ideologies are brought about are essentially founded on the illusions of the ruling classes. Thus they present an image of organic society and progressive history and ironically help to maintain the status quo and to conceal the truth about social relations. They are systems of illusions, of course unknown to the ruling intellectuals who elaborate the systems, for otherwise they cannot "bring the whole soul of man into activity." These self-contradiction and danger concealed within the Romantic Ideology will be explored in the ambivalent and symbolic world of "Kubla Khan."

All of "Kubla Khan" is haunted with senses of loss, fragmentariness and fragility. A sense of loss is first expressed in the introductory prose explaining that this poem is a vision in a dream the poet once had.

...yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast...

Then all the charm
Is broken-all that phantom-world so fair
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,
And each mis-shapes the other. Stay awhile,
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon
The vision will return.9

The lines from "The Picture; or, the Lover's Resolution" are imbedded in this introductory prose narrative. The fragility and fragmentariness of the vision are repeatedly told by a mirror-like images reflected on the surface of the stream. In the poem, Kubla's "stately pleasure-dome" itself is described as the most precarious of structures: "the shadow of the dome of pleasure/ Floated midway on the waves" (11. 31-32). Indeed, we only see it obliquely, and the closest thing we have to a direct view is of its shadow trembling on "the sacred river" which runs through the Khan's equally precarious domain.

Khan's dome, that is, the Jerusalem of the Khan, is a poetic dream, an ideology of poetry and an Idea of the reason imaginatively raised up against time and history, which threaten to carry all things "down to a sunless sea." Here Coleridge clearly relates the story of Kubla Khan to the principle of poetry. Being threatened with the sense of loss, however, the poet concludes with a surmise to revive in himself the song of the Abyssinian maid:

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

Although the poem ends with the surmise, it sustains its own generative power at the ideological level, and drives out the fears which beset our minds and the mind of the poet. We do not have a clear vision of the pleasure dome, but we do have an image which equally confirms the belief that the visionary power returned and will continue to do so as the poetic injunction embedded in the introductory prose narrative: "Stay awhile/... soon/ The visions will return." Those who heard the song and "should" see the dome address the reader with exclamations and present imperatives. The poem ends in a dramatic representation of the imagination's own self-renovating powers.

Looking at the poem from an aesthetic vantage point, we see the congruence of its operation as Coleridge defines in Biographia Literaria: the poetic imagination "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities." The opposite and discordant qualities such as the light and the darkness, the burst into air and the measureless depth, the ejaculation of life and the lifeless world, the tumult and tranquility—all are beautifully balanced and reconciled with each other. Looking at the poem from the conceptual side, we observe the surmisable emotional affirmation of the ideology of poetry it sets out to reveal, interrogate, and finally confirm ("The visions will return"). Thus both in the aesthetic and conceptual aspects, the poem is about Romantic poetry and the special features of Coleridge's Romantic ideology. One of the features of his Romantic ideology is the belief that poetical works can transcend historical divisions by virtue of their links with Imagination, through which we see into the permanent life of things. The poem is about the
emotions felt when we commit ourselves to this belief by “the oblivion and swallowing up of self” and it “brings the whole soul of man into activity.”

The poem operates through symbols and its subject matter and its style are “ideal.” Its concrete symbols forego any immediate social or cultural points of reference because “poetry as poetry is essentially ideal” and “it avoids and excludes all accident” in order to engage with its reader at a purely conceptual level. They engage specifically at the level of ideology, for the conceptual aspects of the poem are delivered obliquely and unself-consciously through its symbols. It in the end urges the reader to assent to the latent structure of the ideas of the poem. The poem in the end affirms Coleridge’s basic ideology of poetry and the power of the creative imagination. As he believed that one could “not hope from outward forms to win/ The passion and the life, whose fountains are within;” in “Kubla Khan” that inward creative fountain is the center of the Khan’s domain and the source of its richness and the poem represents itself as the spontaneous expression of a congruent inner vision of his ideology of poetry and the power of the creative imagination.

The Khan’s Jerusalem, that is, the entire project of the imagination in this poem is, however, continually threatened and haunted by fearful images of evil and destruction.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
as e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!  
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momently was forced: ... (11.12-19)
The deep Romantic chasm is at once holy and savage, the locus of the creative fountain but also a place associated with destructive power and the threat of demolition. We fear that the Khan's domain might be a rank illusion or worse. The poem's central ideas are as precarious as everything in the poem. This precariousness itself seems to generate the images of the poem's creation and the threat of its destruction. This conflict appears on the surface of the poem as the opposite or discordant images. But these surfaces are balanced and reconciled and represent the apparition and aesthetics of the underlying Idea, the ideology of poetry. Consequently, the poem maintains its affirmative stance by forcing itself to live under the threat of its own destruction, and in the fear that its belief are rank illusions. This fear is, however, a displaced critical reaction toward the poem's ideological commitments and unselfconscious affirmations. In other words, it is a conscious and critical response against the "swallowing up of self" in the ideology of poetry and is felt at the moment when the ideology can be no longer an ideology. McGann argues the importance of "Kubla Khan" as follows:

"Kubla Khan" is important as poetry not because it is an oblique presentation of certain abstract ideas, and not because it is a symbolic presentation of certain non-rational belief; it is important as a direct representation, in emotional terms, of the human conflicts which are necessarily involved in their relations. The poem draws its authority from the weight of its belief in itself, which includes the willingness to face and to bear the consequences which are entailed in its commitment.10

Coleridge's ideology of poetry would be raised up in air precariously in between the sacred and savage with the images of its creation and the threat of its destruction in the symbolic world of "Kubla Khan." Its con-
cepts of poetic creation are troubled, problematic and ambivalent. How is Coleridge’s ideology of poetry grasped in the poems after “Kubla Khan?”

The poems such as “Constancy to an Ideal Object,” “Limbo,” “Ne Plus Ultra” and “To Nature” are no longer symbolic poems but allegories, which are, for Coleridge, adapted to expose and explore more critical and self-conscious visions. “Constancy to an Ideal Object” is the most important poem after “Kubla Khan,” to argue Coleridge’s stance of the ideology of “the One Life,” that is, the ideology of poetry. The poem opens so dramatically, with Coleridge beset by an abstract malaise:

Since all that beat about in Nature’s range,
Or veer or vanish; why should’st thou remain
The only constant in a world of change,
O yearning Thought! that liv’st but in the brain? (11. 1-4)

Nothing seems to be dependable or secure around the poet. But what is most troubling and makes him and the reader anxious is Coleridge’s inability to find any consolation in the constancy of his “yearning Thought.” The “yearning Thought” which should be, for Coleridge, the ideology of “the One Life,” or the ideology of poetry, haunts the poet and begins to disturb his sense and his thought. What seems in greatest danger is individual identity itself. Coleridge’s constancy to his ideal object throws him into mirrors where the poet’s personality, thought and the objects of love and attention all begin to lose their identities in a strange series of reflections and displacements.

Yet still thou haunt’st me; and though well I see,
She is not thou, and only thou art she,
Still, still as though some dear embodied Good,
Some living Love before my eyes there stood
With answering look a ready ear to lend,
I mourn to thee and say—"Ah! loveliest friend!
That this the meed of all my toils might be,
To have a home, an English home, and thee!"
Vain repetition! Home and Thou are one.
The peacefull'est cot, the moon shall shine upon,
Lulled by the thrush and wakened by the lark,
Without thee were but a becalmed bark,
Whose Helmsman on an ocean waste and wide
Sits mute and pale his mouldering helm beside. (11. 11-24)

"She" seems most closely associated with the loved object of the "yearning thought." But the ambiguous use of pronouns and the equally ambiguous syntax prevent any certainty: the object of direct address in lines 16-18 seems at once "the yearning thought" ("thee") and the loved object ("she"), but even that identity is not certain. "Home" and "thee," which are "the meed" of all his toils, are also one, and the poet seems to deplore the "Vain repetition" of these words and also of "all my toils." In the end he presents the pursuit of this ideal constancy—the attachment to the ideology of poetry that only a poet and his work can transcend historical divisions and reach at "the One Life"—as the ignorant pursuit of an illusion:

And art thou nothing? Such thou art, as when
The woodman winding westward up the glen
At wintry dawn, where o'er the sheep-track's maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist'ning haze,
See full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head;
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows he makes the shadow, he pursues! (11. 25-32)

Coleridge clearly affirms here that this ideal constancy—this life defend-
ed against its vicissitudes by the firmness of its ideal attachments—is the ignorant pursuit of the illusion he has cherished by himself. Furthermore he alludes to this constancy's potential disaster. The Romantic Ideology which was represented as the spiritual, intellectual and introspective belief in "Kubla Khan," completely loses its symbolism in "Constancy to an Ideal Object." The ideology of poetry is presented here allegorically as the mere illusion and fancy the poet made up. It is also revealed that the pursuit of it is ignorant and self-devastating. Coleridge expresses through allegory a divided or alienated consciousness of the ideology of poetry. He exposes the illusions, divisions and false-consciousness of his own belief that the realm of ideas, especially poetry, provides a ground for reality. He is decisively critical of his own belief and notices its danger.

The more fearful disillusionment is represented with much more aggressive images in his later poems, "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra." This is not merely a condition of perfect emptiness or vacancy but a state of "positive Negation," represented in "Limbo" as follows:

No such sweet sights doth Limbo den immure,
Wall'd round, and made a spirit-jail secure,
By the mere horror of blank Naught-at-all,
Whose circumambience doth these ghosts enthral.
A lurid thought is growthless, dull Privation,
Yet that is but a Purgatory curse;
Hell knows a fear far worse,
A fear—a future state;—'tis positive Negation! (11. 31-38)

A constancy to an ideal object ends not so much in an inconstancy such as one finds "in Nature's range," it finishes in a permanence much more fearful. It is an aggressive condition of vacancy. Recognized identities in
poetry undergo the completely opposite process of the work by the sec-
donary Imagination Coleridge defined in *Biographia Literaria*, a process
of dissolution, division and fragmentation, finally to be “fixed and dead.”
Poetry is completely separated from the reality, robbed of its illusion and
exposed to its aggressive emptiness. This state of “positive Negation” of
poetry even shows one of the features of the post-Romantic
Existentialism. Coleridge, who recognizes himself as the fool persisting
in the folly of his own convictions, arrives at a terrible wisdom in
“Limbo.” Here the forms of belief implicit in “Kubla Khan” are removed
from their symbolism and immersed in a severely critical solution of alle-
gory. What Coleridge arrives at is a new kind of poetry whose fountain is
purely critical and disillusioning.

The more ideological aspects his poetry lost, the more prose works con-
cerning the State, society, civil life, the Church and the Parliament
increased. He came to positively give attention to what he called “the
clerisy,” a more widely distributed network of individuals and social
institutions. He confidently explored politics, society, the State, the
Church and the Parliament after 1810. This is clear if we look at *The
Statesman’s Manual* (1816), *Aids to Reflection* (1825), *On the
Constitution of Church and State* (1830). His enthusiastic devotion to
these prose works seems to be a compensation for his lost ideology of
poetry and the separation of poetry from history. Coleridge might try to
translate his ideology of poetry into social and political theories and aim
at social and political reconstruction through them.

Coleridge’s ideology of poetry is that a poet and his works can tran-
scend a corrupting appropriation by the world of politics and that poetry
is only the countermeasure against the *Zeitgeist*. It is his poetic theory of
“the One Life.” His symbolic poems and his theory of the creative imagi-
nation are purely the representations of this ideology of poetry. Romantic
poetry itself embodies this illusion repeatedly, and in the process it suffers the contradictions of its own illusions and the arguments it makes for them. "Kubla Khan" is very important in the sense that it represents the human conflicts which are necessarily involved in commitment to its belief. This poem itself is represented as the transitional point from the aesthetical and unconscious level of understanding of its ideology into a self-conscious and critical one. The transition from the symbolic poem "Kubla Khan" into the later allegorical poems "Constancy to an Ideal Object," "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra" should be regarded not as the consequence of the loss of his poetical power nor of the decline of his creative imagination, but that of his more self-conscious and more critical understanding of the ideology of poetry.

Notes


text.