

Coleridge's Dream

The lyric fragment "Kubla Khan" (fifty-odd rhymed and irregular lines of exquisite prosody) was dreamed by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge on a summer day in 1797. Coleridge writes that he had retired to a farm near Exmoor; an indisposition obliged him to take a sedative; sleep overcame him a few moments after reading a passage in Purchas that describes the construction of a palace by Kublai Khan, the emperor whose fame in the West was the work of Marco Polo. In Coleridge's dream, the text he had coincidentally read sprouted and grew; the sleeping man intuited a series of visual images and, simply, the words that expressed them. After a few hours he awoke, certain that he had composed, or received, a poem of some three hundred lines. He remembered them with particular clarity and was able to transcribe the fragment that is now part of his work. An unexpected visitor interrupted him, and it was later impossible for him to recall the rest. "To his no small surprise and mortification," Coleridge wrote, "that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, 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, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!" Swinburne felt that what he had been able to recover was the supreme example of music in the English language, and that the person capable of analyzing it would be able—the metaphor is Keats'—to unravel a rainbow. Translations or summaries of poems whose principal virtue is music are useless and may be harmful; it is best simply to bear in mind, for now, that Coleridge was given a page of undisputed splendor *in a dream*.

The case, although extraordinary, is not unique. In his psychological study, *The World of Dreams*, Havelock Ellis has compared it with that of the violinist and composer Giuseppe Tartini, who dreamed that the Devil (his

slave) was playing a marvelous sonata on the violin; when he awoke, the dreamer deduced, from his imperfect memory, the "*Trillo del Diavolo*." Another classic example of unconscious cerebration is that of Robert Louis Stevenson, to whom—as he himself described it in his "Chapter on Dreams"—one dream gave the plot of *Olalla* and another, in 1884, the plot of *Jekyll and Hyde*. Tartini, waking, wanted to imitate the music he had heard in a dream; Stevenson received outlines of stories—forms in general—in his. Closer to Coleridge's verbal inspiration is the one attributed by the Venerable Bede to Caedmon (*Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* IV, 24). The case occurred at the end of the seventh century in the missionary and warring England of the Saxon kingdoms. Caedmon was an uneducated shepherd and was no longer young; one night he slipped away from some festivity because he knew that the harp would be passed to him and he didn't know how to sing. He fell asleep in a stable, among the horses, and in a dream someone called him by his name and ordered him to sing. Caedmon replied that he did not know how, but the voice said, "Sing about the origin of created things." Then Caedmon recited verses he had never heard. He did not forget them when he awoke, and was able to repeat them to the monks at the nearby monastery of Hild. Although he couldn't read, the monks explained passages of sacred history to him and he,

as it were, chewing the cud, converted the same into most harmonious verse; and sweetly repeating the same made his masters in their turn his hearers. He sang the creation of the world, the origin of man, and all the history of Genesis: and made many verses on the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, and their entering into the land of promise, with many other histories from holy writ; the incarnation, passion, resurrection of our Lord, and his ascension into heaven; the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the preaching of the apostles; also the terror of future judgment, the horror of the pains of hell, and the delights of heaven; besides many more about the Divine benefits and judgments . . .

He was the first sacred poet of the English nation. "None could ever compare with him," Bede wrote, "for he did not learn the art of poetry from men, but from God." Years later, he foretold the hour of his death and awaited it in sleep. Let us hope that he met his angel again.

At first glance, Coleridge's dream may seem less astonishing than that of his precursor. "Kubla Khan" is a remarkable composition, and the nine-

line hymn dreamed by Caedmon barely displays any virtues beyond its oneiric origin; but Coleridge was already a poet while Caedmon's vocation was revealed to him. There is, however, a later event, which turns the marvel of the dream that engendered "Kubla Khan" into something nearly unfathomable. If it is true, the story of Coleridge's dream began many centuries before Coleridge and has not yet ended.

The poet's dream occurred in 1797 (some say 1798), and he published his account of the dream in 1816 as a gloss or justification of the unfinished poem. Twenty years later, in Paris, the first Western version of one of those universal histories that are so abundant in Persian literature appeared in fragmentary form: the *Compendium of Histories* by Rashid al-Din, which dates from the fourteenth century. One line reads as follows: "East of Shang-tu, Kublai Khan built a palace according to a plan that he had seen in a dream and retained in his memory." The one who wrote this was a vizier of Ghazan Mahmud, a descendant of Kublai.

A Mongolian emperor, in the thirteenth century, dreams a palace and builds it according to his vision; in the eighteenth century, an English poet, who could not have known that this construction was derived from a dream, dreams a poem about the palace. Compared with this symmetry of souls of sleeping men who span continents and centuries, the levitations, resurrections, and apparitions in the sacred books seem to me quite little, or nothing at all.

How is it to be explained? Those who automatically reject the supernatural (I try always to belong to this group) will claim that the story of the two dreams is a coincidence, a line drawn by chance, like the shapes of lions or horses that are sometimes formed by clouds. Others will argue that the poet somehow knew that the Emperor had dreamed the palace, and then claimed he had dreamed the poem in order to create a splendid fiction that would palliate or justify the truncated and rhapsodic quality of the verses.¹ This seems reasonable, but it forces us to arbitrarily postulate a text unknown to Sinologists in which Coleridge was able to read, before 1816, about Kublai's dream.² More appealing are the hypotheses that transcend reason: for example, that after the palace was destroyed, the soul of the Em-

¹At the end of the 18th or beginning of the 19th century, judged by readers with classical taste, "Kubla Khan" was much more scandalous than it is now. In 1884, Coleridge's first biographer, Traill, could still write: "The extravagant dream poem 'Kubla Khan' is little more than a psychological curiosity."

²See John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (1927) 358, 585.

peror penetrated Coleridge's soul in order that the poet could rebuild it in words, which are more lasting than metal and marble.

The first dream added a palace to reality; the second, which occurred five centuries later, a poem (or the beginning of a poem) suggested by the palace; the similarity of the dreams hints of a plan; the enormous length of time involved reveals a superhuman executor. To speculate on the intentions of that immortal or long-lived being would be as foolish as it is fruitless, but it is legitimate to suspect that he has not yet achieved his goal. In 1691, Father Gerbillon of the Society of Jesus confirmed that ruins were all that was left of Kublai Khan's palace; of the poem, we know that barely fifty lines were salvaged. Such facts raise the possibility that this series of dreams and works has not yet ended. The first dreamer was given the vision of the palace, and he built it; the second, who did not know of the other's dream, was given the poem about the palace. If this plan does not fail, someone, on a night centuries removed from us, will dream the same dream, and not suspect that others have dreamed it, and he will give it a form of marble or of music. Perhaps this series of dreams has no end, or perhaps the last one will be the key.

After writing this, I glimpsed or thought I glimpsed another explanation. Perhaps an archetype not yet revealed to mankind, an eternal object (to use Whitehead's term), is gradually entering the world; its first manifestation was the palace; its second, the poem. Whoever compares them will see that they are essentially the same.

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