

I.A. Richards on “Kubla Khan”

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On Kubla Khan:

Since the poet's unconscious motives have been alluded to, it may be well at this point to make a few additional remarks. Whatever psycho-analysts may aver, the mental processes of the poet are not a very profitable field for investigation. They offer far too happy a hunting-ground for uncontrollable conjecture. Much that goes to produce a poem is, of course, unconscious. Very likely the unconscious processes are more important than the conscious, but even if we knew far more than we do about how the mind works, the attempt to display the inner working of the artist's mind by the evidence of his work alone must be subject to the gravest dangers. And to judge by the published work of Freud upon Leonardo da Vinci or of Jung upon Goethe (e.g. *The Psychology of the Unconscious*, p. 305), psycho-analysts tend to be peculiarly inept as critics.

The difficulty is that nearly all speculations as to what went on in the artist's mind are unverifiable, even more unverifiable

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than the similar speculations as to the dreamer's mind. The most plausible explanations are apt to depend upon features whose actual causation is otherwise. I do not know whether anyone but Mr Graves has attempted to analyse Kubla Khan, a poem which by its mode of composition and by its subject suggests itself as well fitted for analysis. The reader acquainted with current methods of analysis can imagine the results of a thoroughgoing Freudian onslaught.

If he will then open *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, at line 223, and read onwards for sixty lines, he will encounter the actual sources of not a few of the images and phrases of the poem. In spite of—

Southward through Eden went a River large,
Nor changed his course, but through the shaggie hill
Pass'd underneath ingulft . . .

in spite of—

Rose a fresh Fountain, and with many a rill
Waterd the Garden ; thence united fell
Down the steep glade, and met the neather Flood

in spite of—

Rowling on Orient Pearl and sands of Gold
With mазie error under pendant shades
Ran Nectar . . .

in spite of—

Meanwhile murmuring waters fall

Down the slope hills, disperst .. .

his doubts may still linger until he reaches

Nor where Abassin Kings thir issue Guard,
Mount Amara./31/

and one of the most cryptic points in Coleridge's poem, the Abyssinian maid, singing of Mount Abora, finds its simple explanation. The closing line of the poem perhaps hardly needs this kind of derivation

From one source or another almost all the matter of *Kubla Khan* came to Coleridge in a similar fashion. I do not know whether this particular indebtedness has been remarked before, but *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, Bartram's *Travels in North and South Carolina*, and Maurice's *History of Hindostan* are well-known sources, some of them indicated by Coleridge himself.

This very representative instance of the unconscious working of a poet's mind may serve as a not inapposite warning against one kind at least of possible applications of psychology in criticism.