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‘Kubla Khan’ and its Narratives of Possible Worlds

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This essay argues that Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ is a poem about narrative and specifically focuses on the narrative construction of possible worlds, or even utopian worlds. It notes two pairs of narratives. In pair one the utopian narrative of the monarch’s decree which seeks to build a space of pure pleasure is in opposition to the narrative of a prophesy of war. In the second pair the Abyssinian maid’s lyric is undermined by the narrative of amnesia where the speaker is unable to recall the lyric. The poem concludes, the essay suggests, with the idea that a possible world can be created only if we can recall the narrative foundations of this world.

Keywords: Coleridge; Kubla Khan; narrative; possible worlds; utopia

For Mohan G. Ramanan

This essay argues that Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous ‘Kubla Khan, or, a Vision in a Dream: a Fragment’ (published 1816) might be profitably read as a poem about narrative. It argues that the poem’s several narratives all gesture at the reconstitution of society, a possible world. ‘Narrative’ here is taken to mean a form of representation that evokes a certain type of image in the reader/audience. In Monika Fludernik’s view (which seems to echo Harold Rosen’s idea of narrative), the ‘experiences’ of the protagonists in narratives allow the readers to ‘immerse’ themselves in a different world. The narrative itself, she suggests, is ‘a representation of a possible world’ (Fludernik 2009, 6). Narrative thus is a system of signs from which readers cognitively develop a sense of a different world. What emerges from these definitions is the idea of narratives as shaping our perceptions of the present world. But they also are modes of organising our individual and collective imagination by offering us options to the present world. Thus narrative is not simply about the language or form of a text: it is the foundation for cognitive and imaginative acts. Narrative, in other words, tells us about the lived reality of our lives, about entirely possible fictional worlds and about worlds that are not yet here, even in the imagination.

Coleridge’s poem speaks of a monarch’s attempts to harness the power of his own autocratic, authoritarian narrative – in the form of a decree – to the making of a new world, even if this new world exists primarily as a set of images in his narrative. He imagines a possible world and casts that imaginary world in the form of a narrative. Considering that the narrative first emerges from a King, one could assume that it is directed at organising the cognition and imagination of more than one individual reader/listener – indeed it could be directed at an entire subject
population. Such an alternate world encoded in the King’s narrative might very well be utopian. Utopias, one kind of ‘possible worlds’, Ruth Levitas (2007) proposes, is the ‘imaginary reconstitution of society’. This imaginary reconstitution is achieved through *narratives* of possible worlds and alternative societies, as we have seen from the above discussion of narrative. Ruth Ronen (1994) argues that in literary and art theory ‘possible worlds serve to name *concrete artistic phenomena*’ (48, emphasis in original). I propose that the artistic phenomena in the poem cast in the form of particular narratives serve the purpose of offering alternative and possible worlds adjacent to the ‘actual’ one.

In Coleridge’s poem we see four narratives all geared toward the reconstitution of society through radical and disruptive changes. The narratives are in pairs, where one unit of a pair proposes a possible world and the other the possibility of destruction and incapacity.

In pair one, the first narrative is a utopian one, the Khan’s decree for construction of a new space. This is paired with the oppositional multi-voiced, multi-origin prophesy narrative that promises destruction. The second utopian narrative is the Abyssinian maid’s song. This is paired with the amnesiac narrative of the speaker who desperately tries to recall the Abyssinian’s narrative so that he can build the decreed dome. Ultimately the poem disowns the possibility of utopia except in fantasy. In keeping with utopianism (as Louis Marin [1984] has demonstrated), the poem focuses most sharply on the spatial possibility of alternate worlds. So to summarise:

Pair one: decree (utopian) and prophesy (destructive).

Pair two: Abyssinian song (utopian) and amnesiac narrative (destructive).

**Pair one**

The poem opens with a clear and precise narrative: ‘In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/a stately pleasure dome decree’. The ‘decree’, here carrying as it does the weight of a sovereign’s order, is the first narrative. The ‘decree’ expresses both intention and desire for an *architectural* change in a particular space: a pleasure dome. The decree is thus a narrative of utopia where architectural plans, markings on the ground and on paper constitute a vision of the future building which would be the space of *pure* pleasure. The decree is a narrative that calls for *imagining* a pleasure dome, located with considerable geometric and topographical precision by Coleridge at the site ‘where Alph, the sacred river, ran/through caverns measureless to man’.

After telling us of the Khan’s imperial and imperious decree, Coleridge then proceeds to speak of the setting of the promised dome. Within the chaos of the setting the Khan hears another narrative that seems to undermine the possibility of ever fulfilling his architectural dream: ‘and ’mid this tumult Kubla heard from far/ancestral voices prophesying war!’ This is the second narrative in the poem, as Coleridge sets up a ‘realist utopian’ narrative. Realist utopianism, as theorised by Claire Curtis (2008), is the conceptualisation of an alternative world based on a pragmatic understanding of human nature and conditions. It is predicated upon the recognition of ‘fear, self-interest, and pride’ as fundamental human characteristics (413). Speaking of the ‘moderately realist’ view of possible worlds, Ruth Ronen (1994), argues that the actual world is a ‘complex structure that includes both its
actual elements and non-actual possibilities’ (22). In ‘Kubla Khan’, the realist utopian narrative is founded on the human fear of destruction and the non-actual possibility of war. The lines of this narrative speak of the tumult in nature as the very landscape – space – seems to get ready for chaos. Coleridge’s verbs all indicate dynamism, violent movement and speed: ‘turmoil seething’, ‘fast thick pants’, ‘fountain … forced’ and ‘burst’, thresher ‘flails’, and the river ‘sank in tumult’.

This realist utopian narrative is constituted by ‘ancestral voices’. It is also a narrative whose authorship is uncertain. Unlike the decree that emanates from Kubla Khan (the ‘author’ of the decree), the prophesy-narrative does not seem to have a subjectivity at its origins, but rather possesses multiple affiliations – voices – that are not easy to decode. That the Khan interprets these voices as prophesying war suggests that as sovereign he reads one set of meanings into the ancestral voices. If we consider the ancestral voices as representing an archive, then the Khan is the archon, the one with access to the archive but also the one authorised to interpret it. Where the decree was a singular narrative, the war-prophesy is multi-authored. If the first narrative is autocratic in its origins and stated intentions – the dome is the intention of the decree – the second is communitarian and social in a sense, since its authors are many, even as the Khan tries to impose just one meaning on it: war.

Arjun Appadurai (2003) has argued that an archive is a set of aspirations for future interpretations by a culture. An archive, it has been said, is a database. The choice of converting this database into a narrative by pursuing specific trajectories of stories and plots lies with the present (Manovich 2001; Nayar 2010). Therefore, it follows that the ‘voices’ can be interpreted by the present so that they can be made to ‘tell’ either war or utopia, depending on the aspirations of the present. If Khan chooses to read war into the archive of ancestral voices then clearly this second narrative has been made to disrupt, or at least disturb, the first narrative of the decree that sought pleasure and a hortus conclusus of the enclosed and ordered garden. I propose that the second narrative offers another route to the imaginary reconstitution of society: the destruction of the present world as a preliminary, perhaps, to a reconstructed world. This is a realist utopian narrative because it is founded on the assumption (the Khan’s) that there will be destruction, war even. It seems to recalibrate and downgrade the utopianism of the first narrative.

Crucially the poem seems to lean hereafter in semantic weight toward the realist utopianism of the second narrative. We begin to sense that the dome might not be built at all. This illusory nature of the architecture of pleasure – that therefore implicitly suggests that the decree has been emptied of its potential and has only the character of a fable now – is hinted at in the last six lines of section one. First Coleridge speaks of the ‘shadow of the dome of pleasure’ that seems to ‘float … on the waves’. Then he speaks of it as a ‘miracle of rare device’, suggesting other-worldly characteristics, or a dream. Finally, he combines two translucent and ephemeral images in one line: the sunny dome and the caves of ice. Sunlight disappears at the end of day and ice melts. The emphasis on the ephemeral is a logical sequence in the poem’s strategy where the decree is followed by the realist utopianism narrative of war so that the promises of the former are called into question by the latter.

**Pair two**

The third narrative is again a minimally utopian one: the song of the Abyssinian maid. She sings, says the speaker of the poem, of Mount Abora. It must be noted
that the maid’s narrative (the lyric she plays on her dulcimer) is in the speaker’s ‘vision’, and thus it is uncertain as to whether there is such a narrative at all. However, if the utopian is an *imaginary* reconstitution of society, then imagining a world (Mount Abora), like the dome in the first narrative, is surely utopian. More importantly, thinking of the spaces being *imagined* (domes, gardens and mountains) would mean the narratives gesture at non-places and that is precisely what ‘utopia’ etymologically means (‘ou-topia’, nowhere as well as ‘eu-topia’, a good place). In the utopian narratives in the poem the good places are nowhere.

The first and third narratives are utopian because they seek to escape to a place beyond the immediate setting – the pleasure dome in the garden and Mount Abora. Utopia is a projection that moves from the specificity of a place toward what has been called the ‘incipient planetary spatial horizon’ (Balasopoulos 2006, 127), and Coleridge’s speaker is gesturing at possible *places*. But, as we can now see, the poem does not eventually see the utopias as possible at all, and here Coleridge firmly situates his spaces within the traditional meanings of utopia.

After these exercises in narrating utopias, the poem concludes with the suggestion that one can only find pleasure in *imagining* such good non-places. The fourth utopian narrative is about imagining utopias, whether as domes or gardens.

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!

What we might miss in our reading here is the conditional Coleridge carefully places at the beginning of the line ‘*could* I revive within me/her symphony and song’. Coleridge’s speaker does not claim to access the utopian narrative of the Abyssinian maid. Rather he *wishes* he could. What the speaker says is: *if* he can recall the utopian narrative of the Abyssinian maid, he could proceed to build the dome. Having moved away from the Khan decree that ordered the dome, the speaker now only hopes for a memory of the decree-narrative. It is the memory of the promise rather than the promise itself that the poem concludes with. But the conclusion is also consistent in its realism in that the speaker cannot recall the full and extant narrative, hence the ‘*could* I revive’. This also gestures at the non-actual possibilities of forgetting the narrative foundations of an alternate world.

The poem concludes with a yearning for a different or better world, a utopia, in the form of a *hortus conclusus* in another place, but with the clear recognition that such a world can be created only if we can recall the *narrative* foundations of this new world. It must be noted that the dome is never built in the course of the poem, so the decree remains, effectively, a promise, always deferred to the future as a promise of the dome. That is to say, the decree and the Abyssinian maid’s song are blueprints for a new world, even as realist utopian narratives like war and fragmented memory threatem to erase the former.

This reading suggests that we see Coleridge’s poem as an exercise in self-reflexivity, a poem about poetry and narrative. Coleridge’s poem is very close here to William Wordsworth’s poem about the solitary reaper which querulously asks ‘Will no one
tell me what she sings?’ Both the major English Romantic poets are pondering about
the absence/loss of narrative foundations: Wordsworth focusing on the inability to
share the world the reaper’s song creates because he is unable to immerse himself in
the semantic domain of her song (hence absence), and Coleridge focuses on the anx-
xiety of forgetting the narrative he had heard (hence loss). Coleridge by thematising
the artistic and narrative foundations of cognition, imagination and the imaginary
reconstitution of a society is drawing attention to the power of poetry, of his own
poem, in fact. If the decree, the song and other narratives in the poem can imagina-
tively create worlds then the entire poem itself is an ur-narrative about such narrative
foundations of the imagination. Further, it also, I think, expresses a restrained anxi-
ety about the limitations of the poetic act, or rather about the end of imagination. If
a poet cannot recall a pleasing image (the decree and the Abyssinian’s lyric) there is
every risk that new worlds cannot be imagined.

Notes on contributor
Pramod K. Nayar’s newest works include Posthumanism (Polity, 2013), Frantz Fanon
(Routledge, 2013), Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012),
Writing Wrongs: The Cultural Construction of Human Rights in India (Routledge, 2012),
besides essays on posthumanism (Modern Fiction Studies), Indian travel writing (South Asian
Review, New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies), postcolonial life-writing (Ariel) and others.
He is currently working on a book on cultures of surveillance and the Postcolonial Studies
Dictionary.

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