

Traditional Symbolism in Kubla Khan

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MUCH has been written upon this most magical of all poems, each critic who has attempted to explain or explain away seeing Coleridge's poem in the light of his own ignorance or his own knowledge. My excuse for adding another to the number of such attempts is that I know of none which has considered the poem in the light of traditional symbolism understood in its traditional sense. By reason of the substitution, during the present generation, of positivist humanism based on physical science for the terms of reference which were assumed within Christian and pre-Christian European civilization, poetry whose context of reference is that older culture has become virtually meaningless in terms of the new; and "meaningless" is indeed a favourite word of positivist philosophers and literary critics. It is not surprising that the discourse of such poets as Shelley, Coleridge, Milton and indeed much of Shakespeare should become meaningless when its universe of reference is no longer known; it would be strange were it otherwise. The readings of critics of the new barbarism (for such, in relation to traditional culture, it is) are for the most part misreadings; for they mistake metaphorical discourse for naturalistic description, praising or blaming as image what is in fact symbol; for where the metaphysical is discounted, symbolic discourse cannot be understood, and becomes a dead language.

Coleridge, most learned of poets, philosopher of the imagination, was within that older tradition, was indeed an agent in its revival at the turn of the nineteenth century in that renaissance of poetry which followed upon a return to traditional values and to the traditional symbolic language.

All know the story of how the poem was written. Coleridge, staying at a lonely farmhouse on the borders of Exmoor, had taken an anodyne, supposed to be opium. He fell into a charmed sleep, in which a poem rose to his mind, of not less than two or three hundred lines; "the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort." On waking he began to write the poem, but he was interrupted by "a person on business from Porlock . . . and on his return to the room found, to his no small surprise and mortification, 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 had been cast, but alas ! without the after restoration of the latter..."

When Coleridge wrote these words little or nothing was known of the nature of dreams; he was indeed one of the few men of his age to observe or consider the question; and his writings contain many noted observations on, for example, the way in which the dreaming mind will misinterpret some physical sensation, like the ticking of a clock, and weave it into one of those stories which in sleep we all have such a talent for inventing—so much so that we may well wonder whether our sleeping selves are not more remarkable

than those masks we wear in waking life. However, to the nineteenth century the world of dreams was closed. Dreams were not considered to have any meaning at all, and to look for meaning in *Kubla Khan* occurred to no one; its magical power was attributed to sound and image, the subtle incantation of its changing metrical pattern, and the intrinsic beauty of the landscape of imagination Coleridge has painted, like a picture of a country that nowhere exists.

The whole question of *Kubla Khan* was reopened by the American scholar Livingston Lowes, in a book that delighted my generation, *The Road to Xanadu*. Freud's discovery of what he calls "dream-work," the linking together of memories and other images charged with strong emotional association in the construction of dreams, was in the air and doubtless suggested to Lowes his method. Coleridge himself (following Hartley's theory of association) had written of the "hooks and eyes" of memory which link by association something read the day before with something remembered from childhood, or noticed on a journey, by way of some common feature; and Lowes made the attempt to follow, through clues given in his writings, Coleridge's prodigious reading. We know—for he himself has told us so—that Coleridge, before he fell asleep, had been reading in a travel-book, *Purchas's Pilgrimage*, the sentence which had stirred his imagination so deeply as to set in motion the dream-work of the poem; we shall later consider why this was so. "In Xanadu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure." To this, many related themes from Coleridge's wide reading have become associated. The richness of Coleridge's knowledge, the vividness of his memory for the minute particulars of an image described or seen with his own eyes, Lowes abundantly demonstrated. But images do not associate themselves to one another, but to some theme which draws them towards itself, as a magnetic field attracts particles of iron; and what this imaginative field of force was, Lowes has not told us.

Robert Graves a few years later made the attempt—someone was bound to do so—to interpret the poem on Freudian lines, as a dream of suppressed sexual desires and frustrations and so forth; but that fashion gave place in due course to Jung's imaginatively richer discoveries of an innate confirmation of archetypes which tend to appear in similar forms in the myths of all religions, and also in dreams and visions. We may recognize them—whether in myths which move us or in dreams of unusual power—by a certain sense of something already known, of recollection of something we had forgotten, an assent, a coming into our own; anamnesis, Plato calls this awakening of innate knowledge we did not know ourselves to possess.

Those who have penetrated most deeply into these mysteries are the least inclined to be dogmatic; but images of power like those which rose before Coleridge's mind are known to all imaginative poets in some degree, are perhaps the very essence of poetry, and of its power to move us. Yeats wrote that revelation is not from the human personality but from "that agelong memoried 'self, that shapes the elaborate shell of the mollusc and the child in the womb, that teaches the birds to make their nest"; and that "genius is a crisis that joins the buried self for certain moments to the trivial daily mind." He used not opium but the techniques of magic to evoke this "other mind." (This expression was used by Beryl de Zoute in her writings on Balinese dancers; who, "possessed" by that mind,

dance, as Yeats has written, "on deathless feet"). In his autobiography Yeats tells how persons sent into a trance perceive marvellous things which, upon waking, they, like Coleridge, quickly forget. Edwin Muir spoke of the theme of a Paradise lost by the Fall as a part of "the Fable" which he saw in a waking vision; and Yeats, too, tells, in his *Autobiographies*, how one man, in a trance, described "a walled garden on the top of a high mountain, and in the middle of it a tree with great birds in the branches, and fruit out of which, if you held the fruit to your ear, came the sound of fighting" ; and a young girl, sent to the same "garden," heard in the tree "the continual clashing of swords." "Whence came that fine thought of music-making swords, the image of the garden, and many like images and thoughts?" Yeats ventures upon no dogmatic answer, but knew himself "face to face with the Anima Mundi described by the Platonic philosophers." In parenthesis I may say that on one occasion many years ago I myself saw a tree loaded with blood-red fruit, with a blackbird singing in its branches, and its roots watered by streams that rose from darkness; and at the foot of the tree a figure was sleeping. The vision was of a quality unforgettable. There seem to be certain typical features of the Paradise archetype—the tree, the river, the wall, the singing birds, serpent, the clash of swords, the fruit—of which no single vision has all. As Blake says of such visions, which to him were a matter of daily experience, "to everyone it appears differently, as everything else does."

It is easy to see resemblances between Yeats's descriptions of Paradise and the images of *Kubla Khan*: a walled garden on a high mountain, marvellous trees; the sound of discord in the apple, the presence of the principle of conflict of Good and Evil, like Coleridge's "Ancestral voices prophesying war." Coleridge had visited that same garden. Purchas's description of the Khan's walled garden, with its fertile meadows and flowing streams and every kind of beast, had stirred in him the archetype of Paradise as described in *Genesis*, with "every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads."

In *Paradise Lost* Milton describes Eden in symbols which in the course of Christian art have become traditional; and it is easy to see that Coleridge's dreaming mind has drawn upon Milton:

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

(*Paradise Lost*, IV, 223-5)

There is a "fresh Fountain" that
...with many a rill
Watered the Garden; thence united fell
Down the sleep glade, and met the neather Flood...

The subtle magical atmosphere of Milton's Paradise, those
Groves, whose rich Trees wept odorous Gumms and Balme ...

and

... the crisped Brooks,
Rowling on Orient Pearl and sands of Gold,

With mazy error under pendant shades
Ran Nectar, visiting each plant, and fed
Flours worthy of Paradise...

has left its trace on *Kubla Khan*:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills
Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

Enough has been said to illustrate briefly an archetypal theme which could be traced both backwards and forwards throughout the whole history of European poetry and myth; for imaginative poetry, far from being "subjective" and "personal," tends to use and perpetuate traditional images in which "the age-long memoried self" has been repeatedly embodied. It is poetry of the personality and of this world which, on the contrary, seeks for "originality" in images as ephemeral as itself.

But there is also a learning of the imagination: a learning which becomes accessible only to those who know how to use it, through their own insights into the world of intelligible forms which that learning embodies and transmits. All poets, and all readers of poetry who pass beyond the writing or reading of poetry for merely descriptive purposes, cross a frontier from the personal world into the world of those experiences which lie beyond the reach of our everyday consciousness, but to which, in our moments of greatest vision—of expanded consciousness, we have occasional glimpses. In his poem *Sailing to Byzantium*, Yeats reminds us that we can learn of this order of experience only by studying those works of poetry and the other arts in which it is embodied:

Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence...

Traditional art is at once the embodiment, and the normal means of transmission of imaginative knowledge. To the study of those works which embody and transmit the hidden order of the soul all great poets must come in their maturity; it is the language of the initiates. Yeats tells in the introduction to his philosophical essay *A Vision*, written at the beginning of the richest phase of his poetic life, of the course of unusual studies which he had undertaken, whose influence upon his work we immediately recognize, even before we are aware of what wisdom it is which lends such depths of resonance to Yeats's later poems. Blake too offered that wisdom in terms misleadingly simple:

I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball
It will lead you in to Heaven's gate
Built in Jerusalem's wall.

Milton in *Il Penseroso* wrote of the proper studies of the poet who in "some high lonely Tower"

...may oft out-watch the *Bear*
With thrice great *Hermes*, or unspear
The spirit of *Plato* to unfold
What worlds, or what vast Regions hold
The immortal mind that hath forsook
Her mansion in this fleshly nook :
And of those *Daemons* that are found
In fire, air, flood, or under ground...

—a list that forms the canon of the imaginative tradition.

In Europe the symbolic language of tradition, woven and interwoven both within and outside Christianity, is basically Platonic and neo-Platonic. Like an underground river that from time to time sends up springs and fountains, Platonism emerges in different centuries and different countries, and wherever its fertilizing waters flow, there the arts are reborn and flourish. For no renaissance has ever yet come of iconoclasm and rejection of the past, but, on the contrary, from renewed contact with tradition: as the Gothic architecture from a renewed study of the Greek philosophy of numbers; the Florentine renaissance and all that followed from Ficino's Latin editions of the Platonists; or, in our own century, the Irish renaissance from a study of those same works that Milton's poet read in his High Lonely Tower, and which were also the "darling studies"—so he tells us and a friend in a letter—of Coleridge. For when Coleridge was still a schoolboy at Christ's Hospital, the foundations of the great poetry of the Romantic movement were being laid by the unrewarded labours of Thomas Taylor the Platonist, the first translator of Plato into the English language. Taylor also translated, between 1780 and 1800, many of the Tractates of Plotinus, as well as Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, and the other later Platonists; he wrote, besides, a number of remarkable essays on the Orphic mythology and the neo-Platonic use of those ancient myths as the natural language of metaphysical thought. Blake and his friend Flaxman the sculptor knew Taylor; Coleridge as a schoolboy devoured his works; Shelley owned his Plato, and it is likely that Keats also learned from him the use of mythological discourse. His writings crossed the Atlantic to inspire Emerson, Bronson, Alcott, and the other American transcendentalists. Emerson called Taylor "the best feeder of poets since Milton," and Yeats's friend, the poet and mystic George Russell (AE) spoke of him as "the uncrowned king"; and so, for the poets of the Irish renaissance, he was. For Taylor not only placed in the hands of, first, the English Romantics, then the American Transcendentalists, and in our own century the Irish poets, the mythology and philosophy of the Orphic, Pythagorean, Platonic and, neo-Platonic tradition; he also taught them to use that language.

We find only what we are qualified to see; the neglect of the importance, to the Romantic poets, of the perennial wisdom in its European guise of neo-Platonism is a

reflection of the metaphysical ignorance of the post-Protestant West. The worst ignorance is not to know that we do not know; happily, with the rediscovery, through psychology, of at least some part of that lost wisdom, we are beginning to realize how little we have understood in works long familiar. Indeed, the entire European tradition of imaginative poetry, with all the rich variety of image in which ancient and enduring themes have been dressed, in various places and at different times, proves to be strung upon a single thread. To find this thread in one poet is to hold a clue to all; Yeats and Shelley, Blake and Milton, Dante, Virgil, Ovid, Spenser, and Coleridge all speak with the same symbolic language and discourse of the immemorial world of the imagination. Far from introducing obscurity and confusion, a knowledge of these themes draws aside a veil, so that we read familiar works with a new clarity and depth of understanding; read, as it were for the first time, the poems the poets themselves were writing, and not some fantasy of our own which often barely approximates to the original conception.

In the literature of Tradition—the learning of the imagination—Coleridge was deeply versed. When he was a schoolboy he was already reading the neo-Platonists in Thomas Taylor's translations; and shortly before he wrote *Kubla Khan* in the summer of 1797 he had written to his friend Thelwall, (Nov. 17th 1796) in London, asking him to send him a number of the neo-Platonic texts in the original Greek. It was of these themes that his mind was full at the time he wrote the poem. Details of the imagery are of course added, as Livingston Lowes discerned, from personal associations or recent reading, by "the hooks and eyes of memory" ; but the thread upon which these images are strung is the common symbolic language employed by poets and painters of the European tradition, strictly, or, as C. S. Lewis put it, "grammatically" used. For, as Lewis says, "Giants, dragons, paradises, gods and the like, are themselves the expression of certain basic elements in man's spiritual experience. In that sense they are more like words—the words of a language which speaks of the mere unspeakable."

"Alph, the sacred river" is one such theme, upon which I can only suggest a few of the associated strands which Coleridge has condensed into the phrase. The Jewish mystical tradition of the Cabala is based upon the great symbol of "the tree of God," a symbol, like Yggdrasil and other sacred trees, of the whole of manifested being. The Tree is sometimes also conceived as a river through which the creative power flows down from the unmanifested source, the divine origin, symbolized by the letter Aleph, or Alpha; and the river of life descends perpetually from above down to the lowest plane of manifestation, matter; the "sunless sea." Burnet, whom Coleridge quotes at the beginning of *The Ancient Mariner*, and Robert Fludd, Christian Cabalists, both give accounts of this symbol. Moslem mysticism likewise regards the first letter of the alphabet in much the same way as the Pythagoreans regard the number one, and the geometrical point as the dimensionless *punctum* through which all manifestation issues from the unmanifest. A river that flows from a hidden fountain is found in many Greek myths. Psyche, in Apuleius' legend of Cupid and Psyche, is sent to draw water from the unapproachable source of the Styx and the Orphic Hymn to the Fates (Thomas Taylor had translated it) describes those weavers of destiny as dwelling in a dark cave from whose depths the sacred river flows. Porphyry's *De Antro Nympharum* (On the Cave of the Nymphs) is a symbolic description of the cave (Plato's symbol of this world) from whose darkness, "Through caverns measureless to man," issues the river of generation.

"The sunless sea" into which the river flows is a symbol no less universal; *hyle*, or matter, is invariably symbolized by water, on account of its continual flux. It is interesting to remember, in passing, that Taylor in several of his works has written of the use made by the neo-Platonists of the sea-voyage of Odysseus as a symbol of man's crossing of the stormy sea of life—a symbol retained in the Christian rite of baptism; and Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, as Mr. John Beer has mentioned in his book *Coleridge the Visionary*, derives in part from that old voyager. If we assume that Coleridge is following tradition, the sea into which his river descends is called "sunless" because it is the farthest point from the source, the divine light; like "the wat'ry shore" where Blake's Earth sits in the darkness of the world of Experience. To Coleridge the image of ceaseless flux, Heraldeitus' "all is flux" is made terrible and concrete by the image of rocks, the most solid of all things, dancing like chaff in the ever-flowing fountain :

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

In such powerful images does the dreaming mind clothe our thoughts. The earth, that Plato calls an "immortal animal" in whose life all individual lives are but momentary, breathes in "fast thick pants" as the torrent of existence flows away.

But on the waves of "the sunless sea" the "pleasure-dome" is reflected—an image used by Coleridge when he described the fleeting of the idea of the poem itself, "like the images on the surface of the stream." Again the symbol is one common to all the Platonic philosophers. Proclus uses the image of a tree reflected in a river; Plotinus and the Hermetica (Milton's Thrice-Great Hermes) abound in images of the temporal world as a reflection, in water, of the eternal forms; and Plato himself in the *Timaeus* calls this world "a moving image of eternity," and eternity a sphere, the domed vault of heaven; the same dome which was retained in the symbolic architecture of the Byzantine basilica, itself a product of Platonism.

All knowledge, Plato says, is remembrance, *anamnesis*—not memory of events of time or of the individual life, but remembrance in time, and by the individual, of permanent intellectual realities: as of number and geometry, and the harmonious order which underlies all things. *Kubla Khan* both is, and is about, remembrance; its theme is the imaginative experience itself, written in that exaltation of wonder which invariably accompanies moments of insight into the mystery upon whose surface we live. Coleridge likens the arising of remembrance to a woman singing:

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played
Singing of Mount Abora.

The song and the singer come from "Abyssinia," the country of the long-undiscovered source of the Nile, which so long remained a symbol of all inaccessible sources; of Abyssinia, the high source where the gods dwell on their mountain-top—Olympus, Meru, Carmel, Zion, the Holy Mountain under whatever name; the mountain summit of Paradise where the garden is traditionally situated. (The Fall is itself, according to Platonists and Cabbalists, a "forgetting" of eternity; and the "mountain-top" the summit of man's consciousness, the state in which he continuously lived" before the fall). Abyssinia is also the Abyss, the depths perhaps of darkness as of light, Blake's "distant deeps or skies" which underlie creation. From this source of mystery the damsel herself comes; for the beauty of the beloved person evokes, as Plato taught in the *Phaedrus*, recollection. She does not speak or instruct, but sings, to a dulcimer; for music, highest of the arts, springs from a source deeper than words, and nearer to the innate order of the soul, whose harmony, as the Greeks supposed, is that of number.

The dulcimer itself is a one-stringed instrument, the monochord; and upon the monochord Pythagoras worked out the mathematical proportions of three and four, the intervals of the diatonic scale. These intervals, as the Greek philosophers were well aware, can be expressed or discovered in other media besides that of sound: in architecture, sculpture, astronomy. By the Pythagoreans and their successors, it was held that the universe is itself built upon that scale, which was not so much invented as discovered. Kepler demonstrated that the relative distances of the planets from the sun correspond to these intervals. The Lyre of Apollo, an instrument seven-stringed like the diatonic scale itself, was also, according to Thomas Taylor, regarded as a symbol of the underlying numerical harmony of the whole universe—a symbol Keats has so splendidly used in his *Hyperion* fragments. When, therefore, Coleridge made his damsel play, not a violin, clavichord, lute, or flute but, specifically, a dulcimer, it was with intent; she plays upon the chords of harmony which underlie all creation. There could be no fitter symbol of the power of beauty and love to evoke the soul's deepest knowledge.

We may compare Coleridge's Abyssinian maid to Wordsworth's Highland girl in *The Solitary Reaper*:

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago . . .

The image is closer to this world—or more clothed in this world—than Coleridge's, but far from mere realism; for her song too stirs recollection through "numbers," and here too ancestral voices tell of far-off things, and, like the clashing of swords in Yeats's apple, of wars and battles foreknown in Paradise itself; that element of evil of which the Biblical serpent is another symbol.

Keats in the *Hyperion* fragments also describes some such initiatory anamnesis as Coleridge so dramatically underwent; though his symbolism is that of Greek mythology and not of dream. The first version opens with the god Saturn, removed from the world and sunk in sleep; a symbolic landscape whose every image evokes the state of Platonic amnesia, forgetfulness, the unconscious. Saturn, as Keats certainly knew, was the god of

the legendary Golden Age, now lost to mankind; the Classical equivalent of Paradise, that fabled land we each carry within ourselves, forgotten:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale,
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn.

There the banished gods in counsel decide to send a messenger to the world that has forgotten them—Mnemosyne—memory; or, as she is called in the later fragment, Moneta: the meaning of her name is the same. She is the same figure as Wordsworth's singer, as Blake's Jerusalem, as Coleridge's Abyssinian Maid; Jung would have called her the *anima*, whose nature it is to mediate between the world of consciousness and the unconscious. The poet addresses her as someone he has formerly known and half remembers:

How camest thou over the unfooted sea

(the sea is in every tradition—as in the Christian service of Baptism, the voyages of Odysseus and of the Ancient Mariner, or Blake's "sea of time and space" a symbol of the material world and its flux). The figure of Recollection has crossed the forgetful waters; and the poet becomes aware that she has been there all the time, that she is deeply familiar:

Or hath that antique mein and robed form
Moved in these vales invisible till now?
Sure I have heard those vestments sweeping o'er
The fallen leaves, when I have sat alone
In cool mid forest. Surely I have traced
The rustle of those ample skirts about
These grassy solitudes, and seen the flowers
Lift up their heads, as still the whisper pass'd
Goddess ! I have beheld those eyes before
And their eternal calm, and all that face,
Or I have dream'd ...

Memory, at once strange and familiar, comes with "antique mein," from "the age-long memoried self," as if belonging to some immemorial past. The goddess replies that, like Coleridge's Abyssinian Maid, she has visited him in dreams;

Thou hast dream'd of me; and awaking up
Didst find a lyre all golden by thy side
Whose strings touch'd by thy fingers, all the vast
Unwearied ear of the whole universe
Listen'd in pain and pleasure at the birth
Of such new tuneful wonder.

Apollo's lyre, Coleridge's dulcimer, the instrument on which the poet plays the harmony of the universe, is placed in his hands by the goddess from the high lost mountain-top of Eden, or from Saturn's golden world. He has only to contemplate her silent form—for beauty comes from beyond the conscious mind whose communications are in words—in order himself to become eloquent:

Mute thou remainest—Mute? yet I can read
A wondrous lesson in thy *silent* face;
Knowledge enormous makes a god of me

—and the poet then tells how he will banish the sorrows of the world by telling what he knows from the silent goddess. As Yeats says, "Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it."

Coleridge's Abyssinian Maid is a figure more rich in mystery, a more complete expression than Moneta of the poet's relation to the inspiring Muse; for she stands nearer to the mystery of love, and shows, like the "waning moon," a demon-aspect which is no less a face of her divinity than Moneta's tranquil beauty.

In all such female figures the truth is implicit that love (as also for Dante) is the initiator.

Yet her song is of "Mount Abora," the heights of the soul; and the poet's recollection arises from within himself:

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...

He has but to *remember* in order to recreate in his poetry an image of the sphere and harmony of heaven. Keats and Coleridge had both looked into the source and understood that the poem is a gift brought from beyond the poet's personality; he is possessed by a knowledge not his own, a divine frenzy:

And all shall cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread...

Like the Delphic Sybil or the Bacchantes he is literally possessed by the god, so that his hair stands up; Shelley used the same image in the same sense:

Like the bright hair uplifted from the head
Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge

Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm...

The "approaching storm" is the possession of the poet by the god, under the symbolic image of the cloud impelled by the West Wind, the breath of the spirit—a meaning which the symbol of wind and breath has now in both Hebrew and Indo-European traditions. In *Job*, "a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my head stood up." The overwhelming power of the god must be kept within bounds by the drawing of the traditional circle with which magicians draw round themselves a protecting *temenos*.

The invocation of the Inspirers was long customary among poets; and now that the poetic Muse is no longer invoked under that name, Yeats has written of his Instructors, and Edwin Muir "I have been taught by dreams and fantasies." Blake wrote of the Daughters of Inspiration as the muses of true poetry, and was angry when the reality of such inspirations was questioned by people who had never experienced anything of the kind; like Joshua Reynolds, in whose margins he wrote that Plato and Milton were "in earnest" when they spoke of inspiration. Milton (whom Blake took as the type of the inspired man) refused to use the Classical symbol of the Muse for a figure whose sacred aspect, for him, precluded the terms of Pagan mythology:

Above the flight of Pegasean wing.
The meaning, not the name, I call; for thou
Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
Of old Olympus dwell'st, but Heav'nlie borne
Before the hills appear'd or fountains flow'd,
Thou with Eternal wisdom didst converse,
Wisdom thy Sister, and with her did'st play
In presence of th'Almightie Father...

Thus, in order to affirm more strongly her sacred nature Milton translates the Classical into a Biblical symbol, relating the Muse to the Divine Wisdom.

Kubla Khan is at once, finished, and for ever unfinished; like the Hyperion fragment, finished and unfinished likewise, and for the same reason; for with the apotheosis of the poet through the initiatory experience of anamnesis all has been said about the nature of poetic initiation; and what remains to be written—that to which the poet is at the end of the poem looking—is all the poetry which might be drawn from the inexhaustible riches of the world into which he has seen. Therefore at the end of the poem the poet himself, and his reader, has the sense of standing at the beginning, a threshold. It is not merely a threshold, but one might say the Threshold itself of the archetypal world.

That to have undergone such an initiatory vision is the mark of the true poet is recognised in the old Scottish ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, initiated by the Queen of Elfland. Fairyland is, in folk tradition (to quote from Y. Evans Wentz's book *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*) "the world of the subjective." Thomas was told to look at what he saw. there, but to keep silence; as initiates before the Mysteries in antiquity were vowed to silence. He was shown a dark and awe-inspiring place, "Far from the fiery noon,

and eve's one star," where the tides of human experience ebb and flow for ever—powerful symbol of the collective mind upon which the poet draws:

It was a mirk, mirk night and there was nae stern light,
And they waded in red blude to the knee;
For a' the blude that's shed on earth
Rins thro' the springs o' that countree.

We recognise the place to which they presently come:

Syne they came on to a garden green,
And she pu'd an apple frae a tree:
"Take this for thy wages, True Thomas,
It will give the tongue that can never lee."

—for the initiates of that world does not surmise its wisdom, but knows it, and therefore speaks truth. The two stanzas which in *The Oxford Book of Ballads* follow this (xviii-xix) are evidently a later interpolation and have no bearing with the "sacred lore" of the ballad with which they are no less out of key than they would be in *Kubla Khan* or Plato's *Ion*. The Queen of Elfland has something of the ambiguous character of Coleridge's Abyssinian Maid, with whom is associated the sinister aspect of the "waning moon" and "woman wailing for her demon lover." She who gives the poet the apple of immortal knowledge from the Tree of Paradise is perhaps Lilith rather than Eve. "The book of the people recognises this ambivalent aspect of the *anima mundi* and its images; and when in his admiration the poet calls her the Queen of Heaven, she denies this, with perfect truth:

I'm but the queen o' fair Elfland.

—a place of numinous images, bearers of a profound wisdom ; the Muse may "converse" with "the Eternal Wisdom" but even Milton does not quite venture to say that she is that Wisdom itself; and Yeats knew that in that *Hodos Chameleontos* the poet must keep his powers of discrimination for the false is mixed with the true.

Plato tells the same story of poetic initiation almost in the form of a fairy-tale:

For the authors of those great poems which we admire, do not attain to excellence through the rules of any art, but they utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration, and, as it were, possessed by a spirit not their own... like the Bacchantes, who, when possessed by the God, draw honey and milk from rivers in which, when they come to their senses, they find nothing but simple water. For the souls of the poets, as poets tell us, flying like bees from flower to flower, wandering over the gardens and meadows, and honey-flowing fountains of the Muses, return to us laden with the sweetness of melody.

The last two lines of Coleridge's poem, which he brought back from those gardens in his state of divine intoxication, tells of the divine food in images which echo those of Plato, and evoke, for any reader who knows the *Ion*, Plato's dialogue on poetic inspiration, which doubtless was for Coleridge the supreme statement of the traditional role of the poet:

For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise