

## UNREAL: 'THE WASTE LAND' AND 'KUBLA KHAN'

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### RESUMEN

Abundan los casos de semejanza de tono y de tema e incluso una inversión del tema entre 'Kubla Khan' de S.T. Coleridge y los versos de T.S. Eliot que van desde 'What is that sound high in the air'(verso 367) hasta 'In this decayed hole among the mountains/ In the faint moonlight' (versos 386-87) de la 'Tierra Baldía'; semejanzas que constituyen el objeto del presente análisis. Este es un ejemplo más de la gran habilidad de Eliot como 'buen poeta', según criterios del propio Eliot: 'robar' de la tradición literaria y luego emplear 'la mercancía robada' para crear un texto nuevo y original.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Poesía inglesa moderna, Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', Eliot, 'TWL'.

### ABSTRACT

There are many cases of similarity of tone and of theme and even reversal of theme between S.T. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and T.S. Eliot's lines running from 'What is that sound high in the air' (line 367) through to 'In this decayed hole among the mountains/ In the faint moonlight' (lines 386-87) in his 'The Waste Land.' These similarities - the object of this study - are just one example more of Eliot's ability, as a 'good poet', as defined by Eliot himself, to 'steal' from literary tradition and put this 'stolen property' to his own original use.

### KEY WORDS

Modern English Poetry, Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', Eliot, 'TWL'.

## RÉSUMÉ

On trouve un grand nombre de similitudes de ton aussi bien que de similitudes thématiques (et même une inversion du thème) entre le poème 'Kubla Khan' de Coleridge et les vers de 'The Waste Land' compris entre 'What is that sound high in the air' (vers 367) et 'In this decayed hole among the mountains/ In the faint moonlight' (vers 386-87). Ces similitudes qui font l'objet de notre analyse offrent un autre exemple de la grande habileté technique d'Eliot en tant que "bon poète", d'après les critères établis par Eliot lui-même: "voler" dans la tradition littéraire pour s'en servir ensuite de "la marchandise volée" dans la création d'un nouveau texte original.

## MOTS-CLÉ

Poésie anglaise moderne, Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', Eliot, 'TWL'.

"Coleridge was one of those unhappy persons...of whom one might say, that if they had not been poets, they might have made something of their lives... But for a few years he had been visited by the Muse...and thenceforth was a haunted man."<sup>1</sup> so T.S. Eliot describes Coleridge. Who but a haunted man could have written such 'unreal' verses as are found in 'Kubla Khan'? 'In a vision once I saw:/ It was an Abyssinian maid,/ And on her dulcimer she played,'<sup>2</sup> - *A woman drew her long black hair out tight/ And fiddled whisper music on those strings*<sup>3</sup>; 'Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea', 'With walls and towers were girdled round'<sup>4</sup> - *And crawled head downward down a blackened wall/ And upside down in air were towers.*<sup>5</sup> These are but two examples of the many cases of similarity of tone and of theme and even reversal of theme between S.T. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and T.S. Eliot's lines running from 'What is that sound' high in the air (line 367) through to 'In this decayed

1. T.S. Eliot *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) extract in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Prose* ed. John Hayward (London: Penguin Books, 1953) Page 172.

2. Lines 38-40 of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Volume Two. Ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 1986) Pages 354-355.

3. Lines 377-378 of T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' in T.S. Eliot *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1963) Pages 61-86.

4. Lines 4-5 and line 7 of 'Kubla Khan.'

5. Lines 381-382 of 'The Waste Land.'

hole among the mountains/ In the faint moonlight (lines 386-87) in his 'The Waste Land.'

The most striking similarity, above all in tone, belongs to the paragraph in 'The Waste Land' starting with line 378. This paragraph appears to have been originally written in about 1914 or before<sup>6</sup> as part of the unpublished poem entitled 'The Death of the Duchess' and was only slightly modified when introduced into 'The Waste Land.' The lines immediately preceding this paragraph in its original context are:

A chain of reasoning whereof the thread was lost gone  
gathered strange images through which I/we walked  
alone/along<sup>7</sup>

The 'strange images' and the lost thread in the chain of reasoning are surprisingly reminiscent of 'A Vision in a Dream' part of Kubla Khan's subtitle: 'Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment.' In his few explanatory notes added to 'The Waste Land,' Eliot makes no mention of 'Kubla Khan'. Should Eliot's lines have been inspired by 'Kubla Khan' perhaps is of little importance to a semantic understanding of 'The Waste Land.' Nevertheless, it serves as one more example of Eliot's ability, as a 'good poet', to 'steal' from literary tradition and put this stolen property to his own original use. Eliot, in his essay on Philip Massinger published in the *Sacred Wood* (1920), gives his view of what he considers a good poet:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn.<sup>8</sup>

'The Waste Land' is certainly quite different from 'Kubla Khan,' and if Eliot has consciously taken from Coleridge's poem he has greatly modified that which has been taken, creating lines perhaps even more

6. "It would seem from the handwriting that this poem [The Death of the Duchess], 'After the turning,' and 'I am the Resurrection' were written about 1914 or even earlier." Valerie Eliot ed. *T.S. Eliot. The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound* (New York: Harvest/HBJ Books, 1971) Editorial note for page 113. Page 130.

7. Lines 11-12 of T.S. Eliot 'The Death of the Duchess' in Valerie Eliot *T.S. Eliot. The Waste Land*. Page 113.

8. T.S. Eliot *The Sacred Wood* (1920) *Facsimile* (London: University Paperbacks Routledge, 1989).

powerful than Coleridge's. It is hard to decide whether Eliot has, indeed, consciously taken from Coleridge or whether it is simply a case of unconscious echoes. In any case the similarity between the two texts are numerous.

Eliot's lines are believed to reflect the surrealism and the stream of consciousness technique which were newly à la mode in the period in which Eliot was writing. We cannot, however, deny that 'Kubla Khan' has these same qualities. Allegedly composed when Coleridge was under the effects of opium, 'Kubla Khan' portrays a dream world, a paradise. Thus, in a dreamlike way, he describes the unreal. The unreal, small area walled in which is Kubla Khan's 'stately pleasure dome' nevertheless contrasts with the 'Unreal City' of 'The Waste Land' and perhaps we may go as far as to say that in Xanadu we have an anti-waste land.

Pleasure is the *raison d'être* of S.T. Coleridge's paradise to the extent that down stream of the sacred river, though 'Holy and enchanted', there is a 'savage place' which is 'haunted/ By woman wailing for her demon lover.' (lines 15-16) The place is characterised by passion and stimulation of the senses. This is the exact contrary of T.S. Eliot's 'Waste Land' where in the 'Unreal City' the young man carbuncular has 'one bold stare' and making a welcome of the bored and tired typist's indifference, his caresses unreprieved though undesired, engages in the sexual act and then leaves the woman who 'smoothes her hair with automatic hand,' (line 255) glad that it is over. This woman does not wait, for she is 'hardly aware of her departed lover.' (line 250)

In S.T.'s paradise, 'Alph the sacred river, ran/ Through caverns measureless to man' just as T.S. has his river which the narrator invokes:

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song  
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long (W.L. 83-84)

Eliot's narrator says he will not speak 'loud or long' while Coleridge's narrator, on the contrary, prefers the song to have exactly these qualities - to be 'loud and long':

That with music loud and long  
I would build that dome in air (K.K. 45-46)

In 'The Waste Land,' 'Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,' sweet as it sounds, has the only purpose of contrasting the true nature of the sordid river - site of bought sex. The land Alph crosses, in Kubla

Khan, is described as being 'fertile ground' the exact contrary of a 'waste land.' In Kubla Khan there are 'gardens bright' with brooks, there are incense-bearing trees in blossom and there are forests which enfold 'sunny spots of greenery' while the river in 'The Waste Land' has lost its green surroundings. Now the wind crosses the land which has turned brown:

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
Crosses the brown land, unheard.(173-175)

There is pleasurable, sensual stimulation in 'Kubla Khan' while in 'The Waste Land' the stimulation is of an exact opposite sort. Instead of seeing the bright gardens and smelling the sweet incense of blossoms and 'feeling' the sunny greenery which evokes comfort and warmth, the narrator in 'The Waste Land,' as he sits by the river, feels a 'cold blast' at his back, hears 'the rattle of the bones' and sees a rat creep 'through the vegetation dragging its slimy belly on the bank.' (line 188) While 'Kubla Khan' boasts of brightness and sunny spots, 'The Waste Land' is characterised here by darkness as it speaks of a 'winter evening' and of the 'violet hour.' It should nevertheless be noted that 'Kubla Khan' speaks also of caves of ice: 'A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!' (line 36) It must be remembered that the dome, here, contains the garden so, once again, we are reminded of 'The Waste Land': 'After the frosty silence in the gardens'(line 323) just as the 'mighty fountain' flung up the sacred river amid 'dancing rocks' in 'Kubla Khan' reminds us of the long passage - twenty-nine lines long - in 'The Waste Land' commencing: 'Here is no water but only rock.' (line 331) The two texts once again contrast.

We now arrive at the focal point of this comparison - the twenty-one lines of 'The Waste Land' running from lines 367 to 387. While in 'Kubla Khan' the narrator, referring to the pleasure dome, says 'I would build that dome in air' in 'The Waste Land' the narrator asks about something, too, that is in the air: 'What is that sound high in the air.' (line 367) The pleasure dome in Xanadu is a small extent of fertile land: 'Twice five miles of fertile ground' (line 6) while the wasteland is endless and barren: 'hooded hordes swarming/ Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth.'(lines 368-69) Kubla Khan's paradise is surrounded by walls and towers while the cracked earth of the wasteland is 'Ringed by the flat horizon only.'(line 370) However, immediately following this the narrator asks:

What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers (W.L. 372-374)

At this point the two texts appear to converge. In 'Kubla Khan' there is a brusque movement away from the paradise towards death, nevertheless the dead land of 'The Waste Land' is, in Kubla Khan, a lifeless ocean:

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran  
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean  
(K.K. 26-28)

In this tumult the ancestral voices do not bring words of hope as will the thunder with its 'Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.'(line 432), in 'The Waste Land,' for in 'Kubla Khan,' Kubla, amid the tumult of the lifeless ocean, hears 'from far/ Ancestral voices prophesying war!' (lines 29-30) Here, too, Kubla Khan's line 'and sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean' (line 20 ) reminds us vaguely of 'Death by Water' where Phlebas 'a fortnight dead' lies under the sea and 'A current under sea/ Picked his bones in whispers.'(lines 315-316) Again, as can be expected, we have the contrast between Kubla Khan's 'tumult' and The Waste Land's 'whispers'.

'What is the city over the mountains' the narrator in 'The Waste Land' asks. These mountains are caverns in 'Kubla Khan' and that which is lifeless, the ocean, lies below not above. The unreal city is a wasteland for T.S. Eliot while Coleridge also has his unreal city above, for the shadow of which floats on the ocean below. Coleridge's unreal city is, however, a paradise - not a wasteland but a 'fertile ground.' The description of the sinking in tumult in 'Kubla Khan' and the 'Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air' and 'falling towers' in 'The Waste Land' mark the dramatic climax in both passages and in both 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Waste Land' the passages following this climax begin with a woman playing music. In 'Kubla Khan' the new section begins:

A damsel with a dulciner  
In a vision once I saw  
It was an Abyssinian maid  
And on her dulciner she played. (lines 37-40)

In the Waste Land the lady improvises her stringed instrument:

A woman drew her long black hair out tight  
And fiddled whisper music on those strings.  
(lines 378-379)

T.S. Eliot has chosen this part to introduce a series of surrealistic images. It should be remembered that, as mentioned above, the original context of these lines, in 'The Death of the Duchess,' were preceded by 'gathered strange images' through which the narrator walks along (or alone) and so we have:

And bats with baby faces in the violet light  
Whistled, and beat their wings  
And crawled head downwards down a blackened wall  
And upside down in air were towers  
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours  
And voices singing out of empty cisterns  
and exhausted wells. (lines 380-385)

The next paragraph begins in 'The Waste Land': 'In this decayed hole among the mountains/ In the faint moonlight, the green is singing.'(lines 386-87) In 'Kubla Khan' the vision the narrator perceives is the damsel singing of Mount Abora, though Coleridge's 'strange images' come earlier in the text:

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 breeding,  
A mighty fountain momently was forced:  
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
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 momently the sacred river. (12-24)

Not only do these two texts have the same general tone and make a similar impression on the reader, they also have a certain vague similarity in content. In 'Kubla Khan' the word 'down' is mentioned for a second time while in 'The Waste Land' we have the phrase 'downwards

down.' 'Kubla Khan' has a haunted demon and in 'The Waste Land' there are bats which whistle and beat their wings which creates an equally haunted, infernal atmosphere. In 'Kubla Khan' we have a 'swift half intermitted burst', 'huge fragments' which 'vaulted' and the fountain which is flung up the sacred river. All this violent movement reminds us of the cracks and reforms and 'bursts in the violet air' and 'falling tower' of 'The Waste Land' in the section immediately preceding the section under consideration. The combination of the river reversing its direction and the towers girdling the paradise of 'Kubla Khan' remind us of the Waste Land's towers which are upside down. And finally, within the chasm in 'Kubla Khan' there is a woman wailing while in 'The Waste Land' voices are singing out of cisterns and wells.

It might also be noted that the first line of the section in 'Kubla Khan': 'But Oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted' (line 12) is in structure reminiscent of line 202 in 'The Waste Land': '*Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*' (line 202) [And Oh those children's voices, singing in the dome.] Note that '*coupole*' is rendered 'dome' in English and that Kubla Khan's paradise is described as a dome. Furthermore, once again, the two texts contrast. In 'The Waste Land,' '*Et O ces voix d'enfants...*' evokes a sweetness of sound which contrasts with the abrupt sound of horns and motors which precede it, while in 'Kubla Khan' 'But Oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted/ Down' (lines 12-13) is abrupt in nature and contrasts with the preceding idyllic atmosphere of the garden.

'Kubla Khan' speaks of 'A savage place! as holy and enchanted/ As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted.' (lines 14-15) The section of 'The Waste Land' immediately following the section under consideration has a number of similar elements: the savage place is now a 'decayed hole', the 'waning moon is 'faint moonlight' in 'The Waste Land,' and the holy and enchanted atmosphere of 'Kubla Khan' can be seen in The Waste Land's chapel and the singing grass on the tumbled graves about it. Finally, in 'Kubla Khan', after the damsel's song, the poem concludes with:

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice  
And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honeydew hath fed  
And drunk the milk of paradise (50-54)



The narrator tells how paradise is attainable. Success is dependent on being under the influence of some 'divine' inspiration - perhaps the god Dionysys, perhaps opium - in any case the narrator seems to the reader to be suffering some kind of apparent madness. In 'The Waste Land' the paragraph beginning with 'in this decayed hole...' concludes with 'In a flash of lightening. Then a damp gust/ Bringing rain.' (lines 393-94) Here, too, we have a case of success. The flash of lightening opens the way to putting an end to the wasteland just as 'Kubla Khan's narrator's flashing eyes signal the revelation of the secret for attaining paradise. In 'The Waste Land' the thunder speaks and reveals the secret and the poem ends with:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.  
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
 Shantih shantih shantih

Here again, just as in 'Kubla Khan,' the secret to attaining fertile land is in the narrator showing some kind of apparent madness.

The Waste Land and 'Kubla Khan' are speaking from two completely different points of view but in any case both are concerned with man's search for a fertile land, Kubla Khan's fertile ground seems to be limited to a physical existence, a 'gardern of Eden,' an external entity which can bring sensual pleasure into man's existence. The fertile land in 'The Waste Land,' on the other hand, is an internal affair. There is a journey through a spiritual wasteland and a final hope of making this sterile land fertile so that man can be truly alive, freed from an existence where all sensation has vanished. In 'The Waste Land' the solution is a conscious effort on the part of man to change his attitude and to adopt a behaviour involving giving, sympathizing and controlling himself. 'Kubla Khan' offers no philosophical solutions. It merely recounts an accidental stumbling upon a fertile land due to the psychedelic influence of a drug. An external or physiological solution for an external or physical paradise contrasts with The Waste Land's internal or moral solution for attaining internal or spiritual fertility.