The Delta

Volume 3 | Issue 1 Article 5

2008

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Recommended Citation
Higgins '08, Valerie (2008) "Rills: A Map of Misreading," *The Delta*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/delta/vol3/iss1/5

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Rills: A Map of a Misreading

Valerie Higgins

For many of the Romantics, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Percy Shelley, the examination of the power of the human imagination is a central aspect of their poetic and critical works, and they often subordinate reality and reason to the imagination. Shelley, for instance, writes in his *Defence of Poetry* that "[r]eason is to imagination as the instrument is to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance" (1185), and Coleridge adds in his *Biographia Literaria* that the primary imagination is "the living power and prime agent of all human perception" (691). Freely formed, fresh associations between objects and ideas are vital to their poetic works, and they not only accept, but even celebrate the unique associations created by the individual imagination as an antidote to the mechanical reproduction of past language. Wordsworth praises such associations when he writes in *The Two-Part Prelude* that the scenes of nature he viewed as a child ultimately became meaningful to him not only for their inherent beauty, but also as a result of his emotional associations with these objects, so that they became "habitually dear, and all / Their hues and forms were by invisible links / Allied to the affections" (443-445). For each of these poets, the inventions and perceptions of the mind are of greater significance than any aspect of the external world. Since the role of the imagination is so central in the Romantics' world view, their works are often greatly enriched by an imaginative reading in which the reader's own mind becomes an active participant in the work, performing the powers of imagination that the poetry describes. In my own experience, it was an unusual interpretation of a single word in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" that illustrated within my own mind this power the Romantics praised.

When I first read "Kubla Khan" in junior high, I was immediately captivated by its vivid images and found myself repeatedly drawn back to its lines in a way I had never been to any other work. It was subtitled "a vision in a dream," and I took it at its word—only much later would I begin to understand its significance as a portrayal of the Romantic poet as an outsider, creating sublime, airy visions—making no attempt to draw meaning from the poem. When I first read it, I merely allowed myself to be carried through its fantasy landscape as though by my own sleeping mind, filling out each phrase with an abundance of details only loosely suggested by the words. I could almost smell the heavy fragrance—reminiscent of my grandmother's spice cabinet—that wafted from the exotic blossoms of the "incense-bearing tree[s]" (9). The cool, damp darkness of the "caverns measureless to man" (4) and the colder spray of the river as it rolled towards that "lifeless ocean" (28) were nearly tangible on my skin. I lingered within that impossible "dome in air" (46)—sunny even as it cast its shadow on a "sunless sea" (5), filled with glinting, glassy "caves of ice" (36) that never melted, however the sun shone. In particular, however, I was entranced by the line, "And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills" (8). I had recently read a series of science fiction novels, *The Alien Chronicles* by Deborah Chester, that used the word "rill" to describe a decorative frill or fan of skin around the necks of an alien reptilian race, and since I equated these with similar skin formations on frilled lizards, bearded dragons, and certain kinds of dinosaurs, I simply assumed that "rill" was a word used to describe those features.

At the time I was so certain I knew the meaning of the word that it didn't even occur to me to look it up in a dictionary when I encountered it in the seemingly unusual context in which Coleridge used it in his poem. I tried to imagine what he might be intending to convey with this image, finally deciding that he was

using the word rill to describe fern-like plants, which was the closest thing I could imagine to a lizard's neck frill that might be found in a garden. However, I did first consider the possibility that the gardens might be filled with exotic, "rilled" lizards, an image that was never entirely erased from my mind, and so with the reptilian connotations I had given the word "rill," I always imagined glittering, scaled things creeping through the undergrowth of the garden when I read the line. They were only visible in flashes, an echo of my original definition of the word that was half-lost under the lush vegetation the perceived metaphor had seeded in my mind. Since these rills were "sinuous," I saw a variety of ferns and fan-like leaves that grew in a wild, twisting tangle, curving over one another and wrapping around the "incense bearing trees." Add "bright," and this garden was an intricate mesh of emerald so brilliant as to be almost luminous when glimpsed among the blossoming trees—surprising explosions of fronds akin to the "sunny spots of greenery" enfolded by the dim surrounding forests. Once this exotic garden had solidified in my mind, the description of it became my favorite line in the poem, the one that always ran through my head when "Kubla Khan" was mentioned.

I don't remember what context I first ran across the word "rill" in that made me question my own definition of it and prompted me to look it up for the first time, but I do remember my confusion when I pulled the little paperback dictionary down off my bookcase and read that a rill was simply "a small brook." Although the first doubts had been planted, I was not ready to concede the definition that was so essential to my understanding of "Kubla Khan." Instead, I decided that apparently "rill" could mean both the fringe of skin on a lizard's neck and a small brook. I'd encountered stranger things in language before, and I wasn't using a particularly large dictionary. I reasoned that there simply hadn't been room to include the obviously obscure definition I was using, so the next time I went to the public library, I looked the word up

in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I scoured every line of the definition, but there was not one mention of lizards. I still was not quite willing to admit defeat, so I searched online for any use of the word in the way I was defining it that would justify my reading of "Kubla Khan." I found nothing. It was only when I finally accepted that my definition of "rill" was completely erroneous that I focused on figuring out where I had come up with it in the first place, eventually tracing it back to its source in that old series of science fiction novels.

I felt betrayed, but more by "Kubla Khan" than Chester's novels or my own flawed vocabulary. For several years I had been telling anyone who asked that "Kubla Khan" was my favorite poem, mostly based on a line that I had completely misinterpreted. I read the poem again, forcing myself to envision sparkling brooks curling among the "incense-bearing trees" rather than verdant ferns concealing darting reptiles. The poem wasn't the same. The gardens were bare, little more than an empty framework for everything my imagination had once created within them. The image evoked in that line seemed dimmer and more pedestrian than the surreal fantasy garden that I had once found so breathtaking, and the loss colored the rest of the poem. Previously, the brilliant garden from the opening lines had hovered like an afterimage over every succeeding landscape, twining among the roots of the ancient forests, glowing in the sunlight, and reflecting in the caves of ice. Now when I read the poem, forcibly suppressing everything that had sprung from the "sinuous rills," the absence of what I had once seen overshadowed what was there. I still enjoyed "Kubla Khan," but the new meaning of that one word had completely changed my response to it. The images were still beautiful and striking, but they no longer seemed to be the ones I had thought so unique and vivid when I first encountered them. Even when I tried to recall them, my original images became harder to conjure up as the new ones forcibly intruded, becoming

more solid and fixed with every reading. With nothing to support them, the ferns in the garden shriveled, the colors faded, and the lizards vanished into the leaves without reappearing.

I didn't give much thought to "Kubla Khan" or rills again until I began learning about the Romantics' views on the imagination and reading other Romantic works. In particular, it was William Wordsworth's "Crossing the Alps" episode from Book VI of the *Thirteen Book Prelude* which prompted me to reexamine my own experience with a Romantic poem. Mountain peaks are a traditional location for theophanies, such as in the biblical episode of Moses and the burning bush, and so Wordsworth anticipates his crossing of the Alps, expecting to find the experience moving and satisfying to the inner "under-thirst" (489) that drives him. However, Wordsworth and his companion cross the Alps without realizing they have done so, prompting first disbelief and then "deep and genuine sadness" (492) and "dejection" (491) in the poet when they are informed by a local peasant that they have already passed over the mountains and that the rest of their course is downwards. After this "usurpation" (533) of his imagined experience by the more mundane reality, it initially seems to Wordsworth that he has passed over the mountains without any divine encounter or epiphany, the "awful promise" (534) his mind had created around the idea of the experience unfulfilled. His experience, like my gardens of "Kubla Khan," was left an empty framework for a vision that was no longer supported by reality.

For Wordsworth, however, this dejection is passing and ultimately leads to a more powerful internal realization in place of an external experience. He does not simply allow the imagined vision to pass away or dismiss it as misleading, but instead praises the creative power of his own mind, ecstatically exclaiming, "Imagination! lifting up itself / Before the eye and progress of my song / Like an unfathered vapour" (525-527). Wordsworth realizes

that it was not the physical crossing of the Alps that was significan but what the idea of doing so meant to him, and ultimately he achieves a kind of theophany, although not in the way he had intended or expected. He does not encounter a divine force in the Alps but rather his own imagination, and it is in his own mind and its perceptions of the landscape that he glimpses eternity—it is in this "invisible world" that "greatness make[s] abode" (536) and he is "blessed in thoughts / That are their own perfection and reward" (545-546). This insight prompts him to say to his soul, "'I recognize thy glory'" (532).

Wordsworth's experience and his subsequent tribute to the power of his imagination made me realize that my original reading of "Kubla Khan," incorrect word and all, was still a valuable reading. Like Wordsworth's crossing of the Alps, the power of "Kubla Khan" came not from the reading experience itself, but from what my mind made out of that experience. My misreading—both the delight it produced and the devastation I experienced when it was corrected—highlighted for me the power of my own imagination. It was not someone else's words that had moved me so deeply, but the workings of my own mind. The gardens of "Kubla Khan" were sublime because my imagination was sublime—it was not an instrument conjuring up images and ideas on another's command, but rather was itself creating them, and those creations were "their own perfection and reward" (546), independent enough of the poem that had inspired them to sustain themselves in my memory once the support of the words had been removed.

This revelation gave me a new perspective from which to view my misreading: it was a gift, not merely an error. Coleridge's poem was like a blueprint or a map—he had laid out the patterns, but ultimately it was my own mind that had to "build that dome in air" (46). It is a testament to the Romantics' view of the imagination that my mind was able to take Coleridge's brief lines

and construct out of them a vast landscape, from imposing, forest-covered hills to tufts of curling ferns. And not only was I able to wander through that imagined landscape, I was capable of straying from the established views to explore the spaces in between the "incense-bearing tree[s]" (9) and the "sunny spots of greenery" (11), filling in scenes of my own that meshed seamlessly with what was actually there. In his *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley writes that "[a]ll high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially" (1192). In a literal sense, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and its gardens embody this for me. One word, perhaps especially a misunderstood one, can be the seed of an infinite variety of images, each one different depending on the mind it is planted in.

It is particularly appropriate that, of all the Romantic poems, it should be "Kubla Khan" that my mind embellished, given its origin in the unconscious. The entire episode purports to be a dream, and within that dream Kubla constructs another vision, the "pleasure-dome" (2) that in the end is only a "dome in air" (46), vanishing at the close of the poem. The whole work highlights its own ephemeral, phantasmagorical nature while also illustrating its own power, and the images my mind created were as real and vivid as those the poet intended, even though the combination of words that initiated them never existed. Rather than taking away from the images and ideas Coleridge sought to evoke in the reader's mind, my mind's own workings, revealed by the mundane reality of a misinterpreted word, actually highlighted the very power of imagination that Coleridge illustrates in "Kubla Khan."

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