

## The Person from Porlock in “Kubla Khan” and Later Texts: Inspiration, Agency, and Interruption

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Of late, literary criticism has focused on the socio-cultural agency of artistic production, writing in the material elided by the classical tradition of the Muse on the one hand and the Romantic figure of the autonomous genius on the other. We no longer read inspiration by the light of the Muse’s presence, or by the wan light cast by the candle in Chatterton’s garret; “inspiration” as a concept has come to seem an illusion that covers up the full story of the processes by which art comes into being, in which artists respond to large currents within their culture. Thus, older ideas about inspiration have been overshadowed by a focus on artistic production as a complex series of negotiations between an artist and his or her culture, a turn much at odds with twenty-four centuries of thought about inspiration in the Western tradition. The gap between current explanations and those of the past reveal a central problem in aesthetics—how is art really created? Coleridge’s 1816 “Kubla Khan,” with its accompanying narrative about how the poem came into being and how its writing was prematurely stopped by a knock on the door, offers a figure that represents the cessation of inspiration: the person from Porlock. The person from Porlock stands for the interruption of inspiration, and this figure’s popularity in many subsequent narratives by authors writing in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows that the issue of inspiration and its agency continues to vex our collective imagination. After all, the power to stop inspiration must be innately related to the forces that make inspiration possible at all. Who is the person from Porlock, and what gives him the power to stop inspiration in its tracks?

To answer this question, a short review of how the Western tradition has understood the genesis of artistic creation is necessary. This tradition oscillates between two strands, a belief that art follows God-sent inspiration and a belief that art results from the application of craft and design.<sup>1</sup> Ancient Hebrews believed inspiration was prophetic and God-given; the Hebrew prophets either serve as a mouthpiece for God directly, or pass God's words on to the people, through a highly charged vatic poetry. In the oldest Greek sources, notably in Homer and Hesiod, divinity is also the source of all song, though for the Greeks that divinity is Apollo or the Muses. Plato links the poet and the prophet directly: "the good lyric poets [...] are not in their senses when they make these lovely lyric poems [but] are possessed [...]. Herein lies the reason why the deity has bereft them of their senses, [...] the god himself [...] speaks, and through them becomes articulate to us" (534a-d). Aristotle, by contrast, focused on the rational, craft-based qualities of art, those elements open to analysis and criticism. In the Hellenistic period, both sides of this debate flourished: those who argued with Plato that art was at heart divinely inspired were opposed to those who stressed artisan rules, following Aristotle. The Aristotelian tradition was dominant by the time of the Roman critic Horace, and the aesthetic values of skill, finish, and order continued to hold enormous sway throughout the middle ages and the Renaissance.

But the inspirational, prophetic tradition continued in force as well, primarily because the orthodox Christian perspective held that inspiration comes from God, the wellspring of and authority behind scriptural texts as well as works which deal with the sacred, from Dante's *Commedia* to Milton's *Paradise Lost*.<sup>2</sup> From Sidney, whose 1595 *Defense of Poetry* gave due reverence to the prophetic, through the neoclassical re-emergence of Horace, chiefly through Boileau's 1674 *Art Poétique*, these two traditions continued to play themselves out against each other. Pope's purely ironic invocations to the Muses give way, for instance, to the reawakened prophetic tradition that arises through Blake and other Romantic figures.

Romantic ideas of inspiration tend to take a distinctly individualistic, autonomous bent. For example, when Coleridge laments the passing of his visionary capacities, he laments “the passion and the life, whose fountains are *within*” (“Dejection: An Ode”; my emphasis). As Terry Eagleton has argued, during the Romantic era, we begin to see a now “familiar emphasis: a stress upon the sovereignty and autonomy of the imagination, its splendid remoteness from the merely prosaic” (20). The transcendental nature of the imagination offers a “challenge to an anaemic rationalism” (Eagleton 20), but it also offers the self and nature as the divinities which produce this transcendence in lieu of traditional ideas of the divine, whether Hebrew, Greek, or Christian. And, as Coleridge found, the Romantic denial of the world’s influence can be a self-confounding strategy, for the autonomous imagination can end in ostracism. This prophetic but de-sacralized strand reaches later apogees in Rimbaud, who at sixteen wrote that “I am working to make myself a Seer. [...] The point is to arrive at the unknown by the dissolution of all the senses” (1), as well as in Swinburne, Whitman, Dickinson, Allan Ginsburg, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and in so many others.

The tradition which sees the imagination as craft and calls to the Muses as shrewd but cynical strategies on the part of cagey artists also takes an important turn as we move into the more recent past, where the emphasis on craft transmogrifies into an emphasis on the social production of art. As we know, the last several decades of criticism have focused on the role of the social in constructing individual consciousness, motivation, and achievement. This movement is naturally opposed to the Romantic view of autonomously inspired creation; as Karen Burke Lefevre points out in *Invention as a Social Act*, such a view errs in its implication that invention “can be removed from social and material and political concerns, that invention moves from the inside out, and that invention is a process occurring within an introspective, isolated writer” (13-14). As Linda Brodkey has suggested, the model of author as creative, autonomous genius has served much of the nineteenth and twentieth century to inform the

scene of writing, framed as the "solitary writer alone in a cold garret working into the small hours of the morning" (397). We seem to have left behind this scene of solitary writing and have turned instead to "reinstate some of the tensions between readers, writers, and texts that [...] the scene of writing artfully suppresses" (Brodkey 397).<sup>3</sup>

These dual traditions thus currently stand as a tension between the Romantic idea of individual inspiration on the one hand and the socio-cultural idea that the artist writes in response to complex exterior forces—class, gender, economics, ethnicity, nationality, industrialization, globalization, and so on—on the other. To move beyond the irreconcilable opposition of these two views one might simply ask the poets themselves about the sources of inspiration, but doing so is not unproblematic.<sup>4</sup> In practice, there have proved to be significant drawbacks to relying on artists to provide definitive answers. Firstly, the workings of inspiration are mysterious and resist explanation regardless of whether one follows the Romantic or the sociocultural view; that is, both ineffable sources "within" and complex responses to social conditions are difficult to trace and chart. Secondly, artists for various reasons tend to fudge the issue, either because of a dislike of critics and other busybodies—like Faulkner, who openly prevaricated about what he'd been up to in his writing—or because they feel violated by uncovering such private processes. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, an artist's understanding of the workings of the imagination is necessarily constructed in part by the cultural ideas about imagination at hand, ideas from his or her own time or pressing, powerful ideas about the imagination from the past. A contemporary poet like Denise Levertov, for instance, has described the workings of her inspiration in terms that are entirely Romantic; she speaks of

poems which seem to appear out of nowhere, complete or very nearly so; which are quickly written without conscious meditation, taking the writer by surprise. These are often the best poems; at least, a large proportion of those that I have been 'given' in this way are the poems I myself prefer and which readers, without knowledge of their history, have singled out for praise. (7)

We should give this explanation due weight, but our culture is generally too suspicious of the autonomous model of Romantic inspiration and too aware of the social forces which partly inscribe us to accept an explanation such as that here offered by Levertov as the final word.

On the other hand, no twentieth-century critical movement has the power to tell us much of anything about the experience of inspiration so many poets have described: not New Criticism, with its careful avoidance of the personal; not structuralism, with its explicit swerve away from specific textual experience towards broad patterns of imagination; not reader-response or reception theory, where the interest lies rather in the "horizon of expectation" audiences hold; and last, certainly not in post-structuralism or deconstruction, where the author's authority has been destabilized so radically as to leave authorship undone, with no "self" *per se* to receive inspiration in the first place, indeed, with nothing left but "bare, ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang."<sup>5</sup> On the face of it, psychoanalytic criticism should hold some answers, naturally interested as it is in interiority, in the inner workings of the self. But psychoanalytic criticism has been saddled by Freud's "scientific" determination that wish-fulfillment lies at the heart of creative work, and that the artfulness of art is but a "bribe" to allow readers and viewers to guilt-free enjoyment of what are no more than day-dreams.<sup>6</sup> In fact, so little has twentieth-century criticism, broadly considered, had to say about "inspiration" that if one looks up the term in the Modern Language Association International Bibliography, one will find that the bulk of the references point to inspiration in a very narrow sense, that is, when one text has been "inspired" by another, in titles such as "Hopkins's 'Pied Beauty': A Note on its Ignatian Inspiration," or "Source of an 'Inspiration': Francis Newman's Influence on the Form of 'The Dream of Geron-tius,'" and these articles generally date from the nineteen-seventies or before.<sup>7</sup> This fact is one sign among many of how limited are modern views of inspiration and its agency, forces still compounded within

the centuries-old tension between vision and craft, individual and world.

All of which leads to "Kubla Khan," or rather, to the preface to "Kubla Khan," written by Coleridge for the 1816 publication of the poem, the first time it appeared in print. Here is the *locus classicus* for a narrative about prophetic vision—and its loss. The explanation is as famous as the poem itself, and shapes how the poem itself is understood. Coleridge tells us that in an opium dream, he found himself on the receiving end of several hundred lines of poetry, awoke and started madly to transcribe, was interrupted by a knock at the door from "a person on business from Porlock," and, on returning to his desk, found that the fifty or so lines he'd written down thus far were all he could remember. The preface thus asserts that the poem is a fragment, a record of a vision truncated, even, in Coleridge's words, a "psychological curiosity" which the author brings to the attention of a larger world only because another poet—Byron—has urged him to do so.

Read innocently, the preface stands as a potential disclaimer, though whether for the poem's blasphemy, triviality, incoherence, or ineptitude is a matter of disagreement among critics.<sup>8</sup> A few critics doubted Coleridge's explanation from the start, however, partly because of unifying strategies in the poem itself, and partly because the preface's story seems too disingenuous. As early as 1818, Thomas Love Peacock felt Coleridge's tendency to embellish and hence argued against taking his account very seriously:

It is extremely probable that Mr. Coleridge, being a very visionary gentleman, has somewhat deceived himself respecting the origin of "Kubla Khan"; and [...] the story of its having been composed in his sleep must necessarily, by all who are acquainted with his manner of narrating matter of fact, be received with a certain degree of skepticism. (290; qtd. in Hill 79)

The matter was settled, at least in one sense, by the discovery of the Crewe manuscript in 1934, a document in Coleridge's hand dated 1810 which gives his earlier explanation of the poem: "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed in a sort of Reverie

brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797." Not only does this account differ from the preface's (the composition takes place in a reverie, not after a full-fledged opium dream, and there is no hint of the person from Porlock at the door), the Crewe manuscript also has several variants from the published 1816 version, variants which argue eloquently against the notion that the 1816 version represents the poem exactly as it was initially composed in a sort of automatic trance.<sup>9</sup>

I would argue that "Kubla Khan" is more than the poem: that the cultural and literary artifact which has had such enormous influence in the world of the imagination, is rather the full 1816 preface-cum-poem.<sup>10</sup> The preface unifies the poem into an allegory of creation, focusing on the figure of the poet, who becomes imagined as a demonic seer transported beyond the realm of the human. For if we take the preface's account seriously, it seems to tell us that *some* of the poem as we have it was written "without any sensation or consciousness of effort," but that *some* of it came after the fatal interruption—the "eight or ten scattered lines and images," the "still surviving recollections" which the Author "has frequently purposed to finish for himself." The full picture does not reshape itself back to the scene of Kubla Khan's pleasure dome. What follows the stanza break after line 36 is a new vision pulled from recollection—a vision removed geographically and temporally, back to the origins of ABCs: of Abyssinia (present-day Egypt), and of Mount Achor (Amara in the 1810 fragment, a mountain in Milton's Eden). Were this vision, that is, the vision of the Abyssinian muse and her song, to be restored the poet would be able to restore the vision of Kubla Khan's paradise, but we also know that this restoration is an impossible precondition. All the speaker can do at this point is reiterate key terms from the lines of the vision given him in the language of dream, the fragments left to him ("That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!"), before moving to the last conditional vision, that of the speaker as transformed poet-seer.

Here, structurally, we mirror the preface, for this third vision is closest to that set out in the extract from "The Picture" which Coleridge provides as a self-quotation in the preface. In this earlier poem, the vision lost is that of a Narcissus, whose mirror image in the pond is disrupted by a stone; the vision renewed is the sight of one's face:

soon  
 The visions will return! And lo, he stays,  
 And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms  
 Come trembling back, unite, and now once more  
 The pool becomes a mirror. (96-100)

We return to the origin of the whole document, preface and all, that of the poet-figure lost in trance. But this last mirroring, this last achievement, is also only conditional, for as many critics have noticed, lines 42 and following pose an extended subjunctive:

*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 [...]. (42-46)

The framing effects of the preface thus create a mirror in which possible visions reflect back and forth in an infinite regress. As David Perkins has argued, "both the poet of the introductory note and the one of the concluding lines have lost their inspiration; the difference between them is that the modest, rueful writer of the introductory note scarcely hopes to recover it, while the speaker of the poem imagines himself as possibly doing so and creates a sublime image of himself" (99).

This mirroring, even with its ironic reverberations and regressions, is needed to create the unity Coleridge himself saw as the end of poetry. Everywhere in Coleridge's critical writings one can find his insistence on organic unity as a key aesthetic standard. As he wrote in a letter, the purpose of all poems and of imagination itself is "to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or



imagined History move on in a *straight* Line, assume to our Understanding a *circular* motion the snake with its Tail in its Mouth" (Coleridge's emphasis; *Letters*, 4: 545; qtd. in Wheeler 39). Coleridge here references the Greek idea of the *ouroboros*, that self-devouring snake who symbolizes infinity (exactly that: from the figure eight of a snake with its tail in its mouth we derive our mathematical symbol for infinity). This *ouroboric* structure works only if the preface exists to foreground the problem of creation, to invoke the idea of lost vision, and to have the person from Porlock intrude just as a stone is thrown into a pond—all so that, waveringly, we can begin to see the reformed, watery face of the poet in his transports, a vision *we* must see with "holy dread." But this mirrored unity comes only if the person from Porlock is imagined into being. Thus, the key question is not whether or not the preface's story is true, but why it had to be written. Coleridge supplied his person from Porlock to insist on the interior visionary force that compelled the poem into being, a force which forestalls criticism about the poem's incoherence; the person from Porlock also unifies the poem, creating a unified allegory of creation in which the visionary poet of the last lines coheres with the visionary poet of the preface.

In "Thoughts About the Person from Porlock," Stevie Smith, the British modernist poet, provides a response to Coleridge's preface, dilating on her sense of the falsity of Coleridge's account:

Coleridge received the Person from Porlock  
 And ever after called him a curse,  
 Then why did he hurry to let him in?  
 He could have hid in the house.

It was not right of Coleridge in fact it was wrong  
 (But often we all do wrong)  
 As the truth is, I think he was already stuck  
 With Kubla Khan.  
 He was weeping and wailing: I am finished, finished,  
 I shall never write another word of it,  
 When along comes the Person from Porlock  
 And takes the blame for it.

Smith's comment on the problem of inspiration has many of the markings of comic verse: short, highly rhythmic lines, fantastic and playful diction, simple rhymes, repeated lines, and an air of the nursery rhyme and children's tale. But it scans badly, with some lines missing a foot or more from what we are led to expect, and there are other fallings-away from the regularity of comic verse we associate with the poetry of, say, Ogden Nash. The rhymes are haphazard or half-hearted (in the first stanza, for instance, "curse" and "house," or in the tenth stanza, "amen" and "end"). There are run-on sentences—for example, note the extraordinary confabulation in the thirteenth stanza:

I wish I was more cheerful, it is more pleasant,  
 Also it is a duty, we should smile as well as submitting  
 To the purpose of One Above who is experimenting  
 With various mixtures of human character which goes best,  
 All is interesting for him, it is exciting, but not for us.

These mistakes, if so they are, might be better read as dramatically enacted "flubs," conscious errors to underscore the problem of inspiration. Why wail to be let out of a poem, Smith suggests, unless it's not all it should be, unless inspiration itself is waning? The sins against metrical and other expectations of form stand as figurations of the problem of a botched poem, a poem that seems to go on and on without knowing how to stop. One way the poem keeps going, of course, is simply by repeating lines, as Smith does for the first time in the seventh stanza, after setting up the person from Porlock's lineage:

May we inquire the name of the Person from Porlock?  
 Why, Porson, didn't you know?  
 He lived at the bottom of Porlock Hill  
 So had a long way to go.  
 He wasn't much in the social sense  
 Though his grandmother was a Warlock  
 One of the Rutlandshire ones, I fancy,  
 And nothing to do with Porlock.

And he lived at the bottom of the hill as I said  
 And had a cat named Flo,  
 And had a cat named Flo.

The repetition of an entire line is a device common to comic verse, to ballads, and to other traditional poetic forms. But the seventh stanza is an odd place in which to begin repetition; rather, this repetition seems yet another way in which the poem errs on purpose. This particular line (“And had a cat named Flo, / And had a cat named Flo”) bears repeating, as it were, for two reasons: first, the invoked cat will link with the fantastic genealogy Smith invents for Coleridge’s visitor (“his grandmother was a Warlock, / One of the Rutlandshire ones, I fancy”) to suggest that the person from Porlock had something *witchy* to him, a demonic presence not unlike those in “Kubla Khan” itself. Second, the cat’s name, Flo, suggests by homonym exactly that quality which Smith’s and Coleridge’s poems both seem to lack—“flow.” We might even go so far as to consider this cat aptly named if it is indeed a witch’s familiar whose task is to abet the interruption of poems!

By the end of Smith’s poem, the person from Porlock has begun to take on increasingly serious associations, though the poem remains at some level comic. Smith laments,

I long for the Person from Porlock  
To bring my thoughts to an end,  
I am becoming impatient to see him  
I think of him as a friend.  
[...]  
I am hungry to be interrupted  
Forever and ever amen  
O Person from Porlock come quickly  
And bring my thoughts to an end.

Here, the person from Porlock becomes reconfigured with new strands of association: both that of the end-time Christ and the figure of death. Like Coleridge, whom Smith imagines “wailing, ‘I am finished, finished,’” the poem’s speaker describes coming to the end of inspiration as if it were coming under a death sentence; by the last lines, the speaker directs herself to becoming “practically unconscious,” doing Coleridge’s putative opium dream one better. For Smith, the death of inspiration becomes the death of identity, and the figure of Porlock becomes a projection of her drive to creative *thanatos*.

The person from Porlock has had a surprisingly robust later life, not just here in Smith's mordant poem. In many late nineteenth and twentieth-century texts (by authors as diverse as Arthur Conan Doyle, Louis MacNeice, Alan Isler, Douglas Adams, A. N. Wilson, Kurt Vonnegut, and Robert Pinsky), he has taken his place as a powerful trope for how artistic inspiration ebbs and wanes, for how implicated the artist generally is in the loss of the creative vision (Fulford 73-74). For example, in a late Sherlock Holmes story, *The Valley of Fear*, a mysterious informer named Fred Porlock arrives to give Holmes crucial information about the archvillain Moriarty. Doyle signals that the name is particularly worth the reader's attention: "[Porlock] is a nom-de-plume, a mere identification mark."<sup>11</sup> It has been plausibly suggested that the figure of Porlock here represents Conan Doyle's own obsessive desire to be done with the Sherlock Holmes stories, a desire which ultimately led him to send Holmes over the Reichenbach Falls in Moriarty's clutches. Porlock here is the wished-for interruption intuited later by Stevie Smith, not the presumably unwelcome interruption Coleridge recounted.

Or the figure of Porlock may take on an even larger, apocalyptic role. Douglas Adams's 1987 *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, a science fiction fantasy, begins with the annual (but fictional) Coleridge dinner at a Cambridge college, the keynote event of which is always the several hours-long recitation of the epic poem "Kubla Khan" in all its multi-hundred-line glory (Adams imagines that after the last lines we know, "For he on honeydew hath fed / And drunk the milk of Paradise," have been ceremonially intoned, the Cambridge audience settles back for the much longer, "altogether much stranger" section of the poem; 43). Later, we learn that the finished, epic-length "Kubla Khan" encodes an apocalyptic secret which has the potential to finish off the human species, and so through a time machine, Adams's protagonist must travel back to Coleridge's farmhouse, knock on the door, thus becoming himself the person from Porlock, and pretend to sell a form of eighteenth-century insurance: thus is humankind saved to see another day. These and other later figurations of the person

from Porlock as a necessary and welcome anti-Muse are part of a widening of post-Romantic explanations of inspiration. As Robert Fulford points out, “depending on the writer who uses it, Porlock can mean an interruption, an evasion, an excuse not to work, or death” (75). Plainly, the reconfigurations of the person from Porlock represent competing explanations for how inspiration as such is to be understood, and by what agency it operates.

One further recasting of “Kubla Khan” deserves extended attention: E. M. Forster’s short story, “The Road from Colonus.” Here we find a particularly salient narrative about interrupted inspiration, a narrative in which the role of Porlock is performed by British tourists. As many critics have recognized, “The Road from Colonus” takes for its primary source *Oedipus at Colonus*; Forster continues the modernist project of demythologizing the realm of the visionary and prophetic, the ground of Sophocles’s play. In Sophocles’s drama, Oedipus, now banished from Thebes and blind, comes to a sacred grove at Colonus in the company of his daughter Antigone; there he undergoes a spiritual transformation and then dies. In Forster’s story, Oedipus becomes Mr. Lucas, a desiccated elderly Britishman, traveling across Greece with his daughter and a group of other British tourists. Forster underlines his project of deflationary allusion directly: “Ethel was his youngest daughter, still unmarried. Mrs. Forman always referred to her as Antigone, and Mr. Lucas tried to settle down to the role of Oedipus, which seemed the only one that public opinion allowed him” (101).

However, another key allusive text for the story has gone unrecognized (as far as I have been able to determine), that of “Kubla Khan.” For the story also concerns the forcible interruption of an inspired trance, with Mr. Lucas, a tourist, standing in for Coleridge the poet. Mr. Lucas, who has found all of Greece disappointing thus far on his tour—“Athens had been dusty, Delphi wet, Thermopylae flat”—comes to the “Khan” (yes, that’s the name of the place), a small outpost in the modern Greek hinterlands furnished with asphodels, a sacred grove of plane trees, and from deep within the grove’s central

tree, a deep-welling fountain (101-02).<sup>12</sup> There he is overcome by the genius of the place, lost in a swoon of vision which brings him close to the flashing eyes and floating hair of Coleridge's final poet-figure in "Kubla Khan":

The water pressed up steadily and noiselessly from the hollow roots and hidden crevices of the plane [tree], forming a wonderful amber pool. [...] Mr Lucas tasted it and it was sweet, and when he looked up the black funnel of the trunk he saw sky which was blue, and some leaves which were green; [...]. His eyes closed, and he had the strange feeling of one who is moving, yet at peace—the feeling of the swimmer, who, after long struggling with chopping seas, finds that after all the tide will sweep him to his goal. So he lay motionless, conscious only of the stream below his feet, and that all things were a stream, in which he was moving. [...] To Mr Lucas, who, in a brief space of time, had discovered not only Greece, but England and all the world and life, there seemed nothing ludicrous in the desire to hang within the tree another votive offering—a little model of an entire man. (103-04)

This passage reveals a thoroughly Romantic view of inspiration; Mr. Lucas is overwhelmed by transcendence available in one particular spot of nature, a place that unites tree and fountain. But though Mr. Lucas wishes to stay—forever—, his touring companions, including his daughter, try to dissuade him: The inn there is infested with "something worse" than lice, he is told, and he will miss "all [his] engagements for the month" in London if he misses his travel connections (109). Mr. Lucas is stubborn, however, and is helped in his resistance by the inhabitants of the Khan, and by the Khan itself:

The Greeks said nothing; but whenever Mr. Lucas looked their way, they beckoned him towards the Khan. The children would even have drawn him by the coat, and the old woman on the balcony stopped her almost completed spinning, and fixed him with mysterious appealing eyes. [...] The moment was so tremendous that he abandoned words and arguments as useless, and rested on the strength of his mighty unrevealed allies: silent men, murmuring water, and whispering trees. (109)

Finding him obdurate, Mr. Lucas's companions carry him forcibly away on the back of a mule; as he is hauled off, he looks back: "The Khan was hidden under the *green dome*, but in the open there still stood three figures, and through the pure air rose up a faint cry of

defiance or farewell" (111-12; my emphasis). The story concludes with Mr. Lucas re-established within the bourgeois comforts of suburban London, where he has lost all chance at richer human experience, and where the news of the catastrophe that befell the Khan the very night of his forced withdrawal (the sacred tree, felled by lightning, killed all inside the inn) has no power to move him. Forster depicts him at this point as entirely soul-dead; for instance, he has returned to his former dislike of running water and as we leave him is composing a letter to the landlord that complains about the sounds of water in the pipes. His Antigone is left to enunciate the irony: "Such a marvelous deliverance," his daughter says, "does make one believe in Providence" (114).

The allusive dependence on Coleridge's poem is marked: the Khan takes its name from Coleridge's title figure, the sacred landscape that so tempts Mr. Lucas includes the key features of Coleridge's visionary pleasure dome, romantic chasm, and fountain from deep below the earth, and Mr. Lucas becomes a temporary, if thwarted, seer, similar to the poet-figure we must "beware, beware" at the close of "Kubla Khan." More important, however, is the shared trope of narrative—and visionary—interruption. Like Coleridge's person from Porlock, Mr. Lucas's daughter and fellow tourists operate to truncate the violent end Mr. Lucas seemed fated to experience in the Khan (had he stayed, he would have re-enacted the end of Sophocles's *Oedipus*). Though they save him from death, his life thereafter seems Life-in-Death, the fate reserved for another of Coleridge's protagonists, the Ancient Mariner. Though Forster's story is not a fragment, it points toward a narrative that cannot reach its fated close.

This reworking of "Kubla Khan" in "The Road from Colonus" both participates in and challenges Romantic ideas about inspiration. Forster himself elsewhere is a straightforward proponent of these ideas. Speaking of the "lower personality" which creates art, he explains:

It has something in common with all other deeper personalities, and the mystic will assert that the common quality is God, and that here, in the ob-

scure recesses of our being, we near the gates of the Divine. [...] As it came from the depths, so it soars to the heights; [...] as it is general to all men, so the works it inspires have something general about them, namely beauty. [...] What is so wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote, and brings to birth in us also the creative impulse. Lost in the beauty where he was lost, we find more than we ever threw away, we reach what seems to be our spiritual home, and remember that it was not the speaker who was in the beginning but the Word. ("Anonymity" 83)

And elsewhere, Forster describes the process of creation specifically in reference to Coleridge and "Kubla Khan":

[If] the breathing in is inspiration the breathing out is expiration, a prefiguring of death. [...] How precisely [this] describes what happened in "Kubla Khan"! There is conception in sleep, there is the connection between the subconscious and the conscious, [...] and there is the surprise of the creator at his own creation. [...] He spoke and then knew what he had said, but as soon as inspiration was interrupted he could not say any more. ("Raison d'Être" 112)

Thus Forster sees "Kubla Khan" as a particularly salient example of the unconscious operations of inspiration, and is willing to ascribe inspiration to either inchoate forces within the "lower personality" or spiritual forces beyond the self, or both.

However, when Forster re-tells "Kubla Khan" in "The Road from Colonus," a strain of modernist skepticism intrudes, in keeping with the demythologizing purpose of the story in general. Not only does Forster's retelling of "Kubla Khan" leave behind many of the complexities, fragmentations, and mirroring effects of Coleridge's allegory of creation, it also anticipates the displacement of agency contemporary criticism enacts. Here the person from Porlock, the anti-Muse, is society itself and society alone: the social pressure, demand for propriety, and xenophobia of British tourists. The "porlocking" is not internally caused nor does it operate as a symbol of internal processes, as we have good grounds to suspect was the case with Coleridge, who probably invented the person from Porlock to explain his own *aporia*. In fact, modernist demythologizing means that while something in Mr. Lucas, perhaps (in Forster's terms) his "lower personality," calls



forth his inspiration, he loses that inspiration strictly through the interference of others. More importantly, once lost, he becomes a dead soul. Unlike Coleridge, whose vision retreats but who continues to ache for its presence and to write a complex narrative of vision regained, lost, and then regained through artistic unity, Forster's protagonist is left entirely unconscious of his loss once he is removed from the pagan realm of the sacred. Inspiration is taken away completely by outside forces. The protagonist's inspiration is produced, constructed, local, a point Mr. Lucas seems to infer:

When he stood within the tree, he had believed that his happiness would be independent of locality. But these few minutes conversation [with his daughter] had undeceived him. He no longer trusted himself to journey through the world, for [...] old wearinesses might be waiting to rejoin him as soon as he left the shade of the planes, and the music of the virgin water. (105-06)

But he does leave, though not of his own free will, and thereafter is not vouchsafed the generative agony of Coleridge's many laments over lost vision. There is thus a reduced level of interiority in Forster's representation of inspiration and interruption. The last lines of the story tell us that Mr. Lucas does not even hear his daughter's tale of his miraculous escape: "Mr. Lucas, who was still composing his letter to the landlord, did not reply" (376). What Forster has achieved by partly displacing the agency of both inspiration and interruption rebukes the Romantic idea of inspiration; Forster has presaged in this story the more materialist explanations of inspiration now current, while the great waters rushing through the tree in the grove have been reduced to annoying sounds in the plumbing.

Both "Kubla Khan" and "The Road from Colonus" do claim transcendent sources for art. However, I find Forster's achievement less humanly plausible than Coleridge's projection of the person from Porlock. Though Forster's depiction of the transcendent has power here, power even to annihilate, as when the sacred tree falls on the Khan's inhabitants, nonetheless we have a transcendent constrained by modernist skepticism and by Forster's view of the power of the

social. Denying Mr. Lucas interiority after his interruption, denying him even any consciousness of his former vision, indeed makes for a brutal deflation of the Romantic project. Mr. Lucas is not even allowed the sentimental half-shadow of Romantic loss, in other words, nostalgia. But the brutal deflation seems bought at the cost of believability, and perhaps humanness itself, for the strength of the vision with which we are presented should have had more staying power than it is in fact given by the close of the narrative. Coleridge was almost certainly dishonest about how he exactly came to write—and to stop writing—"Kubla Khan," but the highly self-referential allegory of creation that Coleridge's poem-and-preface enact seems to get closer to the mystery of inspiration and the equal mystery of its loss than does Forster's story, with its vision that disappears as if it had never been, with no residue but a wry narrative irony, an irony closer to Stevie Smith's purposely inelegant mangling of the problem of Porlock in her poem. Mr. Lucas's selfishness and pettiness at the end of the story make it impossible to read his loss as a tragedy, for he has come to be a person who does not have adequate moral stature for a tragic fate; he is no Oedipus and is suited only for irony. At any rate, "The Road from Colonus" takes its place in an ever-growing line of twentieth-century texts which recalibrate "Kubla Khan," Coleridge in his farm house, and the person from Porlock. The line of these texts will grow, I prophecy, simply because we continue to need tropes for our continued re-imaginings of inspiration and its loss, and our continued reappraisals of the agency of art itself.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I have relied here and in the following on Leavitt's survey of the history of inspiration, particularly pages 4-26.

<sup>2</sup>In orthodox Christianity, this perspective has been unchanged since the early verdicts of the Councils of Florence and Trent; *vide* what Pope Leo XIII set out in

his 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*: “For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and so far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true” (Ihr 335).

<sup>3</sup>This position holds all the more true when we attempt to understand what gets in the way of inspiration, for traditional assumptions about writers’ authority—as it is underwritten by cultural authority—can be pernicious along lines of gender. See Cayton for a discussion of the unequal position women can find themselves in *vis à vis* writer’s block.

<sup>4</sup>One might even ask the critics where they get their inspiration. Materialist critics, of course, can be rather scathing about the inspirational aspects of literary criticism; *vide* Terry Eagleton on the issue: “Many literary critics dislike the whole idea of method and prefer to work by glimmers and hunches, intuitions and sudden perceptions. It is perhaps fortunate that this way of proceeding has not yet infiltrated medicine or aeronautical engineering; but even so one should not take this modest disowning of method altogether seriously, since what glimmers and hunches you have will depend on a latent structure of assumptions often quite as stubborn as that of any structuralist. It is notable that such ‘intuitive’ criticism, which relies not on ‘method’ but on ‘intelligent sensitivity,’ does not often seem to intuit, say, the presence of ideological values in literature” (198).

Note that Eagleton thinks the more apt comparison for the critic should be the engineer rather than the artist. It is a shame, certainly, that finding ideological values in literature should be so commonly opposed to the very notion of inspiration or creativity; creative genius as such tends to constitute the scandal that cannot be named in most materialist criticism.

<sup>5</sup>The history of literary criticism in the last half of the twentieth century has veered from “master” discipline to “master” discipline, as Paul de Man pointed out in the essay “Criticism and Crisis” (1970)—from sociology to anthropology, to linguistics, to psychoanalysis. From the vantage point of 2007, we can add to de Man’s list the disciplines of philosophy, economics, and history, each “condemning to immediate obsolescence what might have appeared as the extreme point of avant-gardisme briefly before” (3-4). These interruptions de Man sees as fruitful, even inevitable, given the essential self-referentiality of texts, for he argues that something in the fundamental nature of the literary text keeps breaking through any illusions of continuity in the critical tradition, pointing instead to the intervening awkward but generative “void” between text and reference. The interruptions, as one newly-adopted discipline overmasters the next, follow from the incapacity of each model to contain what literature is and what it is not. It is not merely the void between text and referent that impels the heady push on to “newer” critical strategies; it is also the usually unarticulated acknowledgment of the insufficiencies of any given approach to explain ineffable artistic processes

and their sources. For a sympathetic discussion of the trope of interruption in de Man's reading of critical history, see Saunders, especially 49-52.

<sup>6</sup>Freud too, however, works to explain inspiration from an initial stance of his (and our) incapacity in the face of creativity: "We laymen have always been intensely curious to know—like the Cardinal who put a similar question to Ariosto—from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable. Our interest is heightened the more by the fact that, if we ask him, the writer himself gives no explanation, or none that is satisfactory" (419).

<sup>7</sup>These representative articles are by Bernad and Mulcahy, respectively.

<sup>8</sup>See Mellor, 157-58, for a development of the argument that the preface protects Coleridge from a charge of blasphemy by focusing on the poem's triviality or "curiosity"; see also McFarland, 224-25, who argues that the preface is meant to be read against the preface to "Christabel," and thus to present "Kubla Khan" as comparatively less marked by creative individuality. Wheeler, on the other hand, suggests that the preface operates as an "advertisement," whetting the reader's appetite for a psychological sensation or oddity (14). Other views of the preface's function can be found in Magnuson, Milne, and Levinson, among others. Magnuson argues that the preface operates as a narrative frame which establishes the process of the imagination as the theme of the poem (40). Milne also sees the preface as setting the agenda for the poem, even announcing the poem as an allegory for poetic creation (19), while Levinson sees the preface as a unifying strategy, again to focus the reader's attention on the creative process (98).

<sup>9</sup>For the extended argument that "Kubla Khan" was quite consciously composed, based on the textual evidence of the Crewe manuscript and on medical evidence about the effects of opium, see Schneider, esp. 88-89.

<sup>10</sup>Here I have been particularly influenced by David Perkins, who argues at length for the symbiotic relationship between preface and poem. He argues both that "the nonexistent lines haunt the imagination more than any actual poem could" (97) and also that "the introductory note gives the poem a plot it would not otherwise have, indicates genres to which the poem belongs, and presents images and themes that interrelate with those of the poem" (99).

<sup>11</sup>See Scheideman. The reversal from unwelcome to welcome interruption of literary creation is underscored by Holmes's calling Fred Porlock "Friend Porlock" once in the American edition. As Scheideman argues, "Doyle would have considered [Porlock] a friend indeed if contrivance in involving Holmes with Moriarty would have freed Doyle's desk for [writing what he wanted to write, historical fiction.] [Porlock] appears to be a writer's inside joke, although his purpose was 'sinister—in the highest degree sinister'" (20).

<sup>12</sup>Admittedly, the "Khan" in Forster's story and the "Khan" in "Kubla Khan" do not mean the same thing—Forster's "Khan" is an inn, while Coleridge's is the title of a ruler, the title taken by the real historical figure of the Mongol military leader, Kublai Khan (1215-94).

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