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# Imaginary Landscapes: Sublime and Saturated Phenomena in “Kubla Khan” and the Arab Dream

Cassandra Falke

Department of Language and Culture, UiT-The Arctic University of Norway, PO Box 6050, Langnes, 9037 Tromsø, Norway; cassandra.falke@uit.no

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**Abstract:** This article considers “Kubla Khan” and the the Arab dream section from the fifth book *The Prelude* as precursors to the recently theorized concept of saturated phenomenality. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth insist on the limitedness of their dream subjects even as they magnify their dreamt of landscapes to heights of sublimity. Falke describes the implications that this insistence on smallness has for relating experiences of sublime landscapes to experiences of reading or writing poetry.

**Keywords:** sublime; dreaming; romanticism; contemporary phenomenology; Wordsworth; Coleridge; Jean-Luc Marion

## 1. Introduction

Sometimes I am lucky enough to dream childish dreams—childish in that I escape my actual locale, my actual responsibilities, and my actual body. I find myself adequate to any challenge offered by the land I traverse. Animals speak my language. When I’m really lucky, I fly. I once knew a man who was a mighty dreamer. He dreamt one night of horses, running. Carried on the backs of the horses, he was not tossed with the rhythm of the running, but moved smooth above them like the wind that they created. Amazing. Or, more importantly for the considerations of this essay, impossible.

This essay examines two other mighty dreamers—William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—for the sake of understanding more about Romantic period portrayals of sublime encounters, particularly as they relate to the later development of phenomenology. The dream-subjects presented by Wordsworth and Coleridge don’t pass like wind above running horses. They don’t talk to animals. They don’t fly. They dream about the impossible, but they do not embody it. The question motivating this essay is: “Why not?” More specifically, when these poets write dreams, why do they allow the elaborative power of dreaming to magnify landscape to extremes of sublimity while keeping their dreaming characters as frail as our waking mortal selves? I’ll focus my inquiry on two of the poets’ most famous dream poems: Wordsworth’s “Arab Dream” section from Book Five of *The Prelude*, and Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”. Compared to the Simplon Pass or Mt. Snowdon sections of *The Prelude*, the dream of the Arab has received less attention as an example of the Wordsworthian sublime. And although “Kubla Khan” possesses the dramatic landscape, peril, and longings for transcendence associated with the sublime, it too has been overlooked as an important meditation on the nature of the sublime.<sup>1</sup> As cultural-historical and rhetorical investigations have come to dominate investigations of the romantic sublime, texts that frame sublime encounters realistically have received more scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> However, the dreamscapes of “Kubla Khan” and the Arab dream highlight the ontological significance

<sup>1</sup> The most notable exception is: (Evans 2010, pp. 147–57).

<sup>2</sup> For example, (Duffy 2005, 2013; Smith 2018). Or, (Bahti 2012).

of sublime encounters in that they stress the interdependence of human frailty and the sublime aesthetic by choosing to maintain the limitedness of selfhood within the frames of their dreams.

The sublime, viewed in light of its dependence on mortality and limitedness, does not confirm the transcendent powers of reason, as Kant would have it, but echoes philosophically the physical inadequacy that prompts the sense of being overwhelmed. In keeping with this special issue's focus on romanticism and contemporary literary theory, I connect prior readings of these poetic texts to contemporary developments in French phenomenology, relating phenomenology more generally to themes at the forefront of romantic scholarship now before examining Wordsworth's and Coleridge's texts in more detail. In the last thirty years, French phenomenology has developed new concepts for describing the experience of human limitedness, concepts that echo Romantic period conceptions of the sublime but that give new philosophical clarity to experiences that Romantic poets described.

## 2. Critical Background: Phenomenology and Romanticism

Both of these texts have rich histories of critical engagements. The 1990s, especially, saw something of a renewal of interest in Romantic dreaming. Douglas Wilson (1993) offers an extended reading of the dream section of *Prelude V* in his *The Romantic Dream: Wordsworth and the Poetics of the Unconscious*. Wilson's reading complements now-classic readings of the Arab dream section by Geoffrey Hartman (1964), Mary Jacobus (1979), and J. Hillis Miller (1981), all of which see Wordsworth questioning the autonomy of his imagination in relation to unstable acts of signification. Jennifer Ford wrote a book-length consideration of *Coleridge on Dreaming* in 1998. Whereas Wilson's work relies on Freudian theories of repression, Ford's work historicizes Coleridge's writings on dreams in reference to associational psychology and medical understandings of dreaming at the time. As a stand-alone poetic fragment and feature of Coleridge's 1816 collection of poems, "Kubla Khan" appears in many considerations of Coleridge's work, so it would be difficult to designate "classic" readings of that poem. Seamus Perry's (1999) *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* and John Beer's (1962) *Coleridge the Visionary* both contain influential readings. David Perkins's (1990) "The Imaginative Vision of Kubla Khan: Coleridge's Introductory Note" is of particular relevance to my reading because it recognizes the importance of the gap between the narrator of the note, painfully conscious as he is of his limitations, and the figure of the great Khan, with whom the poetic speaker seems to identify for the rest of the text. Tim Fulford's "Dreams and the Egotistical Sublime: Coleridge and Wordsworth", published in 1997, brings the two poems together and highlights the importance of dreaming to these poets' overall bodies of work, arguing that Coleridge "arrived at a new Romantic aesthetic in contradistinction from his friend's" by connecting both poetry and dreaming to a "powerlessness of the will" (Fulford 1997, pp. 87, 89).

Within the history of scholarship on the romantic sublime in general and on these two selections of poetry in particular, the necessity of powerlessness and smallness to the sublime has been somewhat taken for granted. When Thomas Weiskel introduced the terms "negative" and "positive" sublime in his seminal book *The Romantic Sublime* (1976), he focused on the associative and syntactic processes used to contain the sublime (pp. 30–31)—a problem of linguistic-conceptual systems—and on the adequacy (positive sublime) or inadequacy (negative sublime) of imagination to the re-presentation of the sublime moment—a risk of alienation that he reconceives in psychoanalytic terms (pp. 38–62). Most scholars have followed Weiskel in focusing on excess *within* the perceiving consciousness and the flights of imagination or heights of reason or rhetoric we embark on to reconcile ourselves to the sublime, although Weiskel himself recognizes that "there can be no sublime moment without the implicit, dialectical endorsement of human limitations" (p. 44). The examples of scholarship that do begin with the finitude of the perceiver, emphasize through their diversity the needs for a newer philosophical conception of the sublime that can anchor insights beyond what Kantian and Burkeian sublimity can think. Complementing Fulford's attention to the powerlessness of the will, Markus Poetzsch (2014) examines "the quotidian sublime," the discovery of transcendence within the everyday and overlooked, in *Visionary Dreaminess*. Carl Thompson's (2007) *The Suffering Traveler and the Romantic Imagination* argues that Romantic-period authors, especially Wordsworth and Byron,

distinguish their wilderness wanderings from acts of commodified grand-tourism through their willingness to disregard physical peril in pursuing sublime experience. Thompson's interest, however, is more in the historical context of the poets' self-representation than the re-conception of sublimity it implies. Christopher Stokes's (2010) *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime* elaborates on the poet's awareness of finitude and recognizes the connectedness between an appreciation of finitude and any philosophy of the sublime. Beyond these studies, the focus has remained on the incomprehensible quantity or quality overwhelming the perceiving subject (in reference to Kant) or the terror resulting from such an encounter (in reference to Burke), leaving the role of human limitations in experiences of the sublime somewhat under-theorized.<sup>3</sup>

The powerlessness that Fulford notes and the finitude elaborated by Stokes and Poetzch are important because they recognize the interdependence between perceptual limitation and any experience of the sublime. It is this interdependence that contemporary phenomenology helps clarify. The Arab dream sequence and "Kubla Khan" may seem like unusual choices for an exploration of finitude, but the presence of the fantastic within Wordsworth and Coleridge's dream landscapes makes their insistence on the ordinariness of the perceiving subject more remarkable. Although they approach the limitations of conceptualization differently, both Wordsworth and Coleridge recognize the relatedness of finitude and sublimity and both resist the conciliatory action of reason that distinguishes the final moments of the Kantian sublime, implying that even the celebrated romantic imagination fails to accomplish such a reconciliation.

As Frances Ferguson clarifies in *Solitude and the Sublime* (1992), the Burkean and Kantian perspectives on the sublime correspond with persistent debates between empiricism and formal idealism, and the tension between these two positions extends beyond debates about aesthetics to include general conceptions of the self's relation to the world. They include theoretical debates within Romanticism, particularly the tensions between new historicist and deconstructive critical methodologies that remained influential within Romantic-period studies from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Phenomenology mediates tensions between the sensual dependence of empiricism and idealism's faith in rationality by denaturalizing the assumption of a discernable division between experiencing subject and object experienced, and it avoids the stalemate that empirically oriented modes of contemporary theory, such as object-oriented-ontology or speculative realism, are bound to encounter when trying to come to terms with the idealistic tendencies of many canonical Romantic-period texts. Beginning with Husserl, phenomenology questions "How can *consciousness itself* separate out as a concrete thing in itself from that within it of which we are conscious, namely the perceived being, 'standing over against' consciousness in and for itself?" (Husserl 2012, p. 127). Phenomenologists eschew debates about the primacy of sensual versus rational acts and instead try to describe the all-at-onceness of perception and interpretation according to different modes of attention, moods, and embodied states. They recognize that the givenness of the world is always already shaped by culturally dependent concepts, relationships with people and places, and variant levels of ability that individuals do not control.

Phenomenological thought was particularly influential on anglophone scholarship before the rise of deconstruction and new historicism. Both Hillis Miller and Hartman were strongly influenced by phenomenology, Hillis Miller basing much of his early criticism on the work of Georges Poulet and Hartman returning throughout his career to Heidegger. Hartman's work, in particular, has had an enduring influence on Romantic-period studies. As Emma Mason writes, it was Hartman who helped "put to rest concerns that Wordsworth's poetry was too simple to sustain constant rereading" and "forged an aesthetically educative criticism that served to refine readers' powers of perception" through his "intensely creative, thoughtful and responsible style" (Mason 2010, pp. 101, 102). More than a theoretical "approach" that is "used" to read Romantic literature, phenomenology extends

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<sup>3</sup> For example: (Ferguson 1992; Modiano 1984; Cascardi 1987; Voller 1994).

insights already present within Romanticism itself. Tillotama Rajan recognized in *Dark Interpreter* that, “Romantic aesthetics . . . approach recognitions about the status of the poetic act reached by existential phenomenology” (Rajan 1980, p. 20). Although the figures of Kant and Hegel, both forerunners of the phenomenological movement in their attention to acts of perception, have never been far from the considerations of Romantic scholarship, some scholars of Romanticism are narrowing their philosophical focus to work more directly with phenomenology as such. Rei Terada writes playfully about Coleridge’s “phenomenological and epistemological deviance” (Terada 2009, p. 40). Jack Jacobs (2002) finds Romantic-period precursors to Husserl’s critique of the natural attitude in Coleridge’s *Dejection: An Ode*, Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, and Blake’s *Jerusalem*.

Themes that phenomenologists have reconceptualized in important ways are now giving rise to some of the most innovative work in romanticism. William Galperin’s *The History of Missed Opportunities*, for instance, describes the way that the ordinary in Wordsworth’s writing comes to be privileged through “double-takes,” returning in time to something that was almost missed or that offers further future possibility (Galperin 2017, pp. 36, 49–72). He draws on Heidegger, Michael DeCerteau, and Henri LeFebvre.<sup>4</sup> Lily Gurton-Wachter (2016) reconceives “Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention” in her 2016 *Watchwords*, and although she does not refer to phenomenological conceptions of attention, this would be a natural way to carry her initial argument forward. Mary Jacobus (2012) draws on Merleau-Ponty in her examination of *Romantic Things*, as does Louis Economides (2016) in her reconsideration of *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*. My essay, “Negatively Capable Reading” (Falke 2019), discusses Keats’s concept of negative capability in relation to Jean-Luc Marion’s theorization of “negative certainty.” Slowly, then, scholars are returning to the relatedness between romanticism and phenomenology that Rajan sensed, and they are elaborating those relationships with a focus on issues such as temporality, thing-ness, and environmental awareness, which are commanding attention of contemporary literary theorists more broadly. This hastily drawn map of where some scholars of romanticism have recently been cannot predict where we will go next, but within romanticism and contemporary literary theory, phenomenology is increasing in prominence.

Contemporary French phenomenology, in particular, in its turn away from both will-driven concepts of autonomous subjectivity and concept/linguistic-driven understandings of perception, provides new ways of articulating the interaction between the receptivity of phenomena and the limitations of conceptual understanding. It hints at the overplus of experience that language alludes to but never captures. The concept of saturated phenomenality, developed by contemporary phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion provides a more specific means by which to understand the perceptual acts Wordsworth and Coleridge poeticize. Marion follows Husserl in conceiving of perception in terms of intentionality and intuition. Intentionality refers to the attention we direct toward an event, thing, memory, or concept, and intuition refers to that which is given to perception. Phenomenology has traditionally begun by considering intentionality as the initiator and center of perceptive acts. Marion reverses this and argues that intentionality responds to the call issued by the givenness of intuition.

Two consequences of this reversal are of particular interest with regard to Coleridge and Wordsworth’s dreams. First, givenness precedes being. Arriving “not in utter nakedness,” as Wordsworth puts it in the “Ode on Immortality” (Wordsworth 2004, line 62), the “I” that any of us become never can be subsumed by acts of will that would direct or adequately conceive our process of becoming. The facilities of sense are already given, as are our bodies. Whether the “fellowship” “vouchsaf’d” to *The Prelude*’s speaker (I: 445) “among woods/At noon, and ‘mid the calm of summer nights” (I: 448–49) is credited, in vaguely Hegelian terms, to “the Wisdom and Spirit of the universe” (I: 431), or “the ancient earth” (II: 331), or to “God and Nature” (452) or “the one life” in “all things”

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<sup>4</sup> The extent to which Lefebvre, as a Marxist thinker, can be regarded as a phenomenologist is debatable, but Kipfer et al. (2008) are right to see his writing as a “materialist adaptation of Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard” (p. 14). See also (Schmid 2008, pp. 37–40).

(II: 435–36), Wordsworth repeats that it is given, not produced by any “I.”<sup>5</sup> Coleridge likewise insists that the imagination does not move on its own, but is always intertwining elaborative activity and passive reception. He writes in the *Biographia Literaria* that

There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. (In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the imagination) (Coleridge 1985, p. 222)

The imagination works with what is given already, passively receiving it as well as transforming, synthesizing and recreating it. In “Kubla Khan,” the speaker longs to revive within him the “symphony and song” of the Abyssinian maid, but without it being given, he cannot (line 43).<sup>6</sup> The guide appears at the side of Wordsworth’s dreamer, and all the dream-subject can do is “rejoice” (V: 81), not willfully create or adequately conceive.

The second consequence of prioritizing given intuition over intentionality is the overwhelming givenness that Marion calls “saturated phenomenality.” In any event, any encounter with a work of art or another person, even in encountering our own lived experience of our bodies, what is given exceeds the concepts intentionality brings to perception, and we perceive the presence of an unthinkable excess (2002). As Wordsworth suggests in the phrase “thoughts that lie too deep for tears,” this excess is not categorizable as emotional or cognitive excess. It overwhelms us at the level of ability. We cannot take in all that any single moment of our lives would give us. Although we do not always experience the saturation of intentionality, the possibility of being overwhelmed is always at hand. Marion’s saturated phenomenality resembles what Thomas Weiskel labels the “second moment” of the Kantian sublime, that moment when the perceiving subject recognizes that what he or she confronts exceeds the sensual and rational powers of perception (Weiskel 1976, pp. 22–24). Whereas in Kant, that second sublime moment is followed by a third moment wherein reason discovers the consoling fact that it can account for perceptual limitations (Kant 1987, p. 115), Marion’s saturated phenomenality implies that all that follows are more saturated phenomena. We realize that we cannot fully remember, articulate, or comprehend the event of a moment before, be it a confrontation with the vastness of a mountain or the moment of a friend’s greeting. Reason does not at that moment console itself for knowing what it missed. Instead we realize that even the moment in which we recognized the limitedness of our ability to receive a given moment reduplicates that inability. Looking back at what just happened, we find myriad possibilities for interpreting that moment, and we know that we cannot know the consequences of the interpretations that we half choose and half discover. We know that it would be foolish to accept what reason received from that moment as all there was. The overwhelming givenness of saturated phenomenality is thus realized in reference to the past and also projected into the future. Both the Arab dream and “Kubla Khan” emphasize the limitedness of the perceiving subjects in their dreams, and rather than projecting a poetic speaker who overcomes this limitedness through an act of creativity or reason, they portray the poetic speaker as doubly limited: limited in his ability to recall the dream and limited as a waking mirror of the limited dream subject.

### 3. Inadequate to Dreams

In Wordsworth’s Arab dream, the narrator slips off to sleep reading Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and finds himself in a “sandy wilderness,” which he interprets in sublime terms. The plain is “boundless,” the wilderness visibly sandy but also “all black and void.” It is an “illimitable waste,/With the fleet waters of a drowning world” (V: 136–37). DeQuincey recalled the passage twenty years after having seen it, and it remained for him the “ne plus ultra of sublimity” (DeQuincey 1889, p. 268). Indeed,

<sup>5</sup> All references to *The Prelude* appear in the text and refer to the 1850 edition (Wordsworth 1971).

<sup>6</sup> References to “Kubla Khan” appear in the text and refer to the Coleridge (1985), pp. 102–4.

the landscape even exceeds Burke's qualifications for the sublime, being not only overwhelming, causing the dreamer "distress and fear" (line 74), but also impossible, apocalyptic. The dreamer learns that a "deluge" is coming, bringing with it "Destruction of the Children of the Earth" (line 97). It is incomparable and immeasurable, as Kant stresses the sublime according to quantity must be, and this immeasurability is only emphasized by the evocation of "geometric truth" in the opening lines (Kant 1987, pp. 14010–15). Here are the first twelve lines:

On poetry and geometric truth,  
 And their high privilege of lasting life,  
 From all internal injury exempt,  
 I mused; upon these chiefly: and at length,  
 My senses yielding to the sultry air,  
 Sleep seized me, and I passed into a dream.  
 I saw before me stretched a boundless plain  
 Of sandy wilderness, all black and void,  
 And as I looked around, distress and fear  
 Came creeping over me, when at my side,  
 Close at my side, an uncouth shape appeared  
 Upon a dromedary, mounted high. (V: 65–76)

Note how many things happen to the dreamer in that passage that are outside of his control. His senses "yield" to the sultry air. He doesn't decide that it is time to rest; sleep "seizes" him. "Distress and fear" come "creeping" over him like some sort of animal. This sense of being an object rather than a subject of experience is echoed in Coleridge's prefatory note to "Kubla Khan." Coleridge initially claims to have composed, while sleeping not "less than from two to three hundred lines," but then retracts the assertiveness of the active verb "composed," questioning instead "if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort." The illusion of a correspondence between linguistic expression and what phenomenologists call intuition fades as soon as he wakes up, as does the illusion of willful control.

Marion writes that literature, like other forms of art, is a product of the artist resisting what is given. "The more the intuitive given increases its pressure, the more a great resistance becomes necessary in order for *l'adonné* [the gifted] still to reveal a phenomenon there."<sup>7</sup> In the case of saturated phenomena, "it solely depends on the resistance of *l'adonné* to manage to transmute, up to a certain point, the excess of givennes into a monstration to an equal extent, that is to say, unmeasured. This opens the way for a phenomenological theory of art" (Marion 2002, p. 51). The passiveness noted by both Wordsworth and Coleridge, is always part of the experience of any phenomenon, but paradoxically, the receptivity demanded by saturated phenomena is less passive than the reception of common or poor phenomena. These we receive by subsuming them under pre-formed categories, thereby rendering them useful for communication or further comprehension (or prompt dismissal from our attention). But saturated phenomena exceed the bounds of concepts we have in place and the bounds of concepts we could form. What Marion labels "resistance" is the poet's attempt to reveal an experience of saturated phenomenality in its fullness by restricting it to an artistic form. Poems restrict givenness the way a narrow conduit of rocks restricts a river, revealing its power through restriction without ever stopping the motion of what it restricts. A work of art can reveal the saturated phenomenality of everyday events like sleeping or meeting an animal, as in the lines above from Wordsworth, but a work of art also manifests itself as a saturated phenomenon in the moment a viewer, listener, or reader receives it. In the preface to "Kubla Khan," Coleridge notes the overwhelming of intentionality by intuition for the

<sup>7</sup> In reorienting phenomenology toward givenness, Marion disputes the autonomy of "the subject" and uses instead the term "the gifted."

poet, in the act of composition. Wordsworth focuses more on the saturation that overcomes a reader, book-ending his dream of the desert with reference to the “strong entrancements” of Shakespeare and Milton (V: 162–65) and other “consecrated works of Bard and Sage” that seem ready to burn through the pages of the books that contain them, the “shrines so frail” that must be protected in the dream (V: 42–49)

Wordsworth, more than Coleridge, writes with a sense that this overwhelming givenness is present all around. It is strongly present in “living Nature” (V: 177); otherwise, the speaker says, he would never be detained out of doors when he could read instead. It is present in the books he dedicates this section of *The Prelude* to, and it is there in the act of composition, when “some airy phantasies/That had been floating about for years” and “the many feelings that oppressed [his] heart” must somehow be rendered into verse (I: 120–23). But for Wordsworth, the most poetically inspiring aspect of all of these experiences of saturated phenomenality seems to be his inability to take it in. This is revealed in the Arab dream through his emphasis on the dreamer’s inadequacy.

The dreamer meets a semi-Quixote charged with rescuing poetry, symbolized by a shell, and “geometric truth”, symbolized by a stone.

He seemed an Arab of the Bedouin tribes:  
A lance he bore, and underneath one arm  
A stone, and in the opposite hand a shell  
Of a surpassing brightness. At the sight  
Much I rejoiced, not doubting but a guide  
Was present, one who with unerring skill  
Would through the desert lead me; (V: 77–83)

Later, the poem of the shell foretells

Destruction to the children of the earth  
By deluge, now at hand. No sooner ceased  
The song, than the Arab with calm look declared  
That all would come to pass of which the voice  
Had given forewarning, and that he himself  
Was going then to bury those two books:  
The one that held acquaintance with the stars,  
And wedded soul to soul in purest bond  
Of reason, undisturbed by space or time; (V: 97–105).

Even in this apocalyptic moment, the Arab Quixote proves himself impossibly adequate to this impossible dream landscape, and thus confirms for readers the possibility of dreaming a character as grand as the land he inhabits. It is not as though Wordsworth presents a landscape so sublime that no person could be adequate to it. The Arab Quixote can find his way among this desert “waste” (V: 71, 85). He confirms “with calm look” that destruction is indeed coming (V: 100), but he preserves a sense of purpose in the face of total destruction. When he sees the gleaming “waters of the deep/Gathering upon [them]”, he leaves the terrified dreaming narrator behind and appears adequate to completing the task of saving poetry and geometric truth. He is at home in the sublime. The dreamer, on the other hand, stands stuttering after him and wakes “in terror” (V: 137). He is unable to find his way without a guide. He does no service to this dream world, has no purpose, and is not even capable of remaining in the dream long enough to see the Arab’s purpose accomplished. Wordsworth’s amplification of the Arab Quixote’s adequacy to the sublime serves to emphasize the smallness and powerlessness of his dreamer, and by implication other regular mortals.

In “Kubla Khan”, similarly, the landscape that the dreaming narrator finds himself in is also sublime. The caverns are “measureless”, the atmosphere “savage” (lines 4 and 27, 14). And just as Wordsworth’s dreamer did, the Coleridgean dreamer encounters a character who is at home in this extraordinary, impossible place.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
 Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
 Through caverns measureless to man  
 Down to a sunless sea.  
 So twice five miles of fertile ground  
 With walls and towers were girdled round:  
 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. (lines 1–11)

Kubla Khan has only to speak and, like God on earth's first mornings, he makes things appear. He did "a stately pleasure dome decree" and there it came to be, "a miracle of rare device" (lines 35–36). Like the Wordsworthian Arab who crosses the sublime desert bearing with him geometric truth and poetry, Kubla Khan brings measurable form (a walled garden of "twice five miles") into his sublime landscape. He has created a productive space within the sublime landscape. The river floating below his pleasure palace remains "sacred"; Coleridge describes it thus three times, every time he mentions it. Kubla has not deflated the transcendence of the place but he is able, like Wordsworth's Arab, to accomplish his purposes within it. When his purpose is design, he positions his pleasure palace so that the sacred river meanders exactly "Five miles...with a mazy motion" before it merges again with the sublime landscape. When his purpose is war, he fulfills the role he appears to have been bred for by hearing "from far/Ancestral voices prophesying war" (lines 29–30). In contrast to Wordsworth's dream guide, however, Kubla Khan excels through verbal creative power and conceptualizing intellect; the Arab appears to accomplish his task through an unwillingness to admit his smallness in the face of the deluge.

Coleridge's narrator's inadequacy also seems creative and conceptual more than physical. He stands on the far shore of Kubla's sacred river. He reports Khan's creative acts from some distance since he is able to see a "deep romantic chasm which slanted/Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!" and "Five miles" of meandering river" (lines 12, 25). Instead of being able to create, he can only observe. He can mince the gardens into proportion as he sees the fertile ground, like a prospector. He can measure the track of the river, but he, like Wordsworth's dreamer, can find no purpose that he is able to fulfill here. Kubla lives in this savage and romantic place and carries on his duties as leader of a one-occupant city. Coleridge remains excluded, noting scrupulously what he has concepts for and what remains "measureless to man" (line 27). Like Wordsworth's dreamer, Coleridge's dreamer recognizes the landscape's sublimity, recognizes that the character native to this dream landscape finds a home amid sublimity, but also experiences an awareness of his own inadequacy to the dreamt-of place.

The inadequacy of the speakers within the dream landscape is echoed in the inadequacy of the poet-narrators who recall these dreams. Coleridge writes in the poem's last stanza that he is excluded even from experiencing this place again as a dream.

A damsel with a dulcimer  
 In a vision once I saw:  
 It was an Abyssinian maid,  
 And on her dulcimer she play'd,  
 Singing of Mount Abora.  
 Could I revive within me,  
 Her symphony and song,  
 To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
 That with music loud and long,  
 I would build that dome in air,  
 That sunny dome! those caves of ice!



And all who heard should see them there,  
 And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
 Weave a circle round him thrice,  
 And close your eyes with holy dread,  
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
 And drunk the milk of Paradise. (lines 37–54)

“If” he could capture the “symphony and song” of his last stanza’s Abyssinian maid, then (then!), he could speak into being “that dome in air,” then he would be, if not physically, at least imaginatively adequate to the sublime landscape he has portrayed in what appears to be a separate dream of Xanadu. He would in fact manifest sublimity in himself, so that onlookers would “Weave a circle round him thrice,/ And close [their] eyes in holy dread” (lines 51–52). But he ends the poem without moving beyond this hypothetical possibility. Wordsworth’s speaker, too, lapses into conditional language when thinking about the event of the dream

... yea, will I say  
 Contemplating in soberness the approach  
 Of an event so dire, by signs in earth  
 Or heaven made manifest, that I could share  
 That maniac’s fond anxiety, and go  
 Upon like errand. (V: 156–61)

To be willing to say that one *could* share such an errand is hardly to claim adequacy to fulfill the errand.

#### 4. Conclusions

Both of the poems follow a pattern. An unwilling takeover of sleep is succeeded by a dream-vision of a sublime landscape in which the speakers emphasize their own inadequacy by contrasting themselves with a figure who the sublime cannot overwhelm. Both speakers are perplexed by these other figures, as well as by the landscape they inhabit. In “Kubla Khan” this perplexity is expressed in the sublime language of “holy dread”; in the Arab dream, it is expressed through the dreamer’s inability to determine how he could conceptualize his guide, who he calls both “semi-Quixote” and “Arab phantom”. In both cases, the dreamers recognize both the landscapes and its inhabitants as saturated phenomena in that they know they cannot conceive of what they have experienced because of sheer intuitive excess. Following this, both poet narrators report on their inability to adequately conceptualize the dreams themselves, implying that the events of the dreams and the events of poetically describing the dreams also overwhelm the poet-speakers’ intentional capacity. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge anticipate Marion’s articulation of saturated phenomenality as it is exemplified in relation to the natural world, other people, memory, and works of poetry, but particularly in their relation of the act of creating or encountering art, they differ in their descriptions of being overwhelmed.

In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke claims that “astonishment” “is the passion caused by the great and the sublime in nature when those causes operate most powerfully” (Burke 2015, p. 47). Burke defines astonishment specifically as: “that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case, the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (Burke 2015, p. 47). This seems a fit description of Wordsworth’s encounter with the desert. He only gives readers the barest description of what he sees, noting his inability to see or comprehend what he sees by calling it “black and void.” The narrator even comments on his own mental passivity. He tries to ask himself in line 84 what the stranger might be carrying, but seems incapable of generating any ideas. Similarly, “strange as it seemed,/ [He] wondered not” at the shell and stone being called “books” when they were clearly a shell and stone. Instead he maintains “perfect

faith in all that passed" (V: 111, 113–14). Then, forty lines after finding himself in this astonishing landscape, his fear subsides enough for his soul to move again, but he does not assume any possibility of agency in relation to the coming apocalypse. He recalls only that he begins to wish "To cleave unto this Man" (V: 115–16). Even after the suspension of animation prompted by astonishment passes, the narrator's pervading emotion regarding this landscape remains terror, which Burke specifies as the surest stimulant of sublime astonishment. When our dreamer wakes, he wakes "in terror" (V: 137).

This is the point where, in a typical post-Kantian conception of the sublime, reason would step in and reconcile him to the ambiguities and enormities of the dream. At first, this appears to be what happens. When *The Prelude's* speaker recalls dreaming, he reconciles the figure he met as both "semi-Quixote" and "Arab phantom" to become a singular, rationally apprehensible "living man,/ A gentle dweller of the desert" (V: 142–44). But this apparent reconciliation is illusory. He finds that he still cannot account for this guide. He is "crazed," but even that capacious concept does not hold him (V: 145). Wordsworth's speaker concludes that "Reverence was due to a being thus employed;/ And thought that, in the blind and awful lair/Of such a madness, reason did lie couched" (V: 150–52). Reason is so buried within this Russian doll system of perceptions that Wordsworth's speaker cannot be sure it is there, and if it is there, it is "couched" like some animal contained. It hides in madness, which hides in the Arab's/Quixote's purposiveness, which hides in a dream within a story spoken to a friend within a poem. Wordsworth shifts registers of astonishment from terror back to the everyday willingness to be overwhelmed that characterizes the speaker of *The Prelude* for most of the poem. He moves away from the sublime experience if we conceive it, following Burke, in terms of feeling, but viewing this passage in light of saturated phenomenality, we see that the recognition of overwhelming givenness does not pass the way that sublime terror does. It alters the experiencing subject by expanding his capacity to experience saturated phenomenality and usher it into expression through artistic "resistance," to recall Marion's language again. "Stringed like a poor man's heifer at its feed" (V: 240), tied to concepts that are useful but limiting, the capacity to be overwhelmed dwindles, and we become like the child described later in Book V, who thinks he can "spell the stars" (V: 318), but among nature, books, and friends, the poet-speaker's awareness of what he cannot conceive baffles him more and more. The poem's speaker does not claim to adequately contain the intuitive excess of the dream in an imaginative or reasonable presentation, but shows how having lived through the terror of the sublime, his still-inadequate capacity to take in excess givenness has been expanded.

In "Kubla Khan", Coleridge has carefully selected language that conveys the sublimity of this landscape, but astonishment is not his character's dominant emotion. In Wordsworth's poem, the language tends to convey the subjective, the individual experience of astonishment. The dreamer feels "distress of mind," "great joy," "fear," and finally, "terror" (V: 74, 76, 115, 137). He rejoices, thinks, understands, and wishes (V: 81, 83, 95, 115), all personal experiences of intellect and emotion, with no suggestion that anyone else would experience these same thoughts and feelings if transported into this dream landscape. Coleridge, in contrast, refers to no personal impressions of the sublime landscape in his dream until line 38: "In a vision once I saw." The language of the poem suggests that anyone looking across the river at Kubla's palace would experience the sublimity of the landscape in quite the same way as our narrator. The caverns are objectively "measureless," the sea objectively "sunless" (lines 4, 5). The place would remain "savage," "holy," "enchanted," and "sacred" to all comers (lines 14, 24). This objectified description of a sublime landscape seems very Kantian. Kant rigidly separates the concepts of subject and object. For him, like Burke, sublimity belongs to our subjective experience of a landscape.

Coleridge's language subscribes to this subject/object division, with three stanzas describing the sublime landscape in objective terms and the fourth recounting the narrator's subjective experience. The "I" of the poem does not appear explicitly until the fourth stanza. Before that the palace simply *is*, and we infer the speaker who is there to observe it. No fewer than eight "was"s and "were"s occur in the first three stanzas, reinforcing the objective existence and independence of this dreamt landscape. The fourth shifts to a subjective, first-person perspective, where Coleridge reminds us of the dreamer

filtering our perception of Kubla's palace. "In a vision once I saw," maid and palace. "Could I revive within me" that music, the speaker says, he would have the creative power of Khan. The stanza includes the associations inspired by the sight of Kubla Khan's land as well as the ambivalent, hopeless sort of hope that it inspires in the narrator. He recounts a "damsel with a dulcimer," whose "symphony and song" he associates with the "deep delight" he would need to imitate Kubla's creative act. He fumbles this hope and keeps readers from hoping for it through his verbs: "would win," "would build," "should see," "should cry" (lines 44, 46, 48, 49). But, he relishes the possibility that this could have been for eighteen lines. The strong subjectivity of his reflection on his own associations and emotions contrasts with the objective language of former stanzas.

Coleridge's approach to the sublime differs significantly from Kant at this point, though. According to Kant, we walk away from our experience of the sublime with the sense that however inadequate our minds are to taking in the sublime, we are nevertheless equipped to think about this inability. Our meta-cognitive reflection on our experience of the sublime thus dulls the fear that Burke suggests characterizes the sublime experience. According to Kant "the feeling of the sublime is a feeling of displeasure that arises from the imagination's inadequacy, in an aesthetic estimation of magnitude, for an estimation by reason" (Kant 1987, pp. 114–15). Kant describes this gap between what our imagination intuits and our reason explains as painful because in a sublime experience we realize our own unfitness for the world. But, Kant says, it

is at the same time also a pleasure, aroused by the fact that this very judgment, namely, that even the greatest power of sensibility is inadequate, is [itself] in harmony with rational ideas, insofar as striving toward them is still a law for us. For it is a law (of reason) for us, and part of our vocation, to estimate any sense object in nature that is large for us as being small when compared with ideas of reason. (Kant 1987, p. 115)

Reason thus regains power over the mind when it reflects on the experience of sublimity, and that restoration of control Kant calls pleasurable. Coleridge follows Kant's steps for perceiving the sublime: first, observe the objectively unquantifiable landscape in the first three stanzas; second, experience subjective effects of that landscape in stanza four, down to line 42 (where he recalls the Abyssinian maid); third, mediate the distance between objective and subjective experience through meta-cognitive reflection about the sublime experience. This is the last 13 line section of the poem. However, in step three, Coleridge also meta-cognitively reflects on his own *inability* to meta-cognate. He does not achieve the pleasure that Kant thinks we have following a sublime experience where we make ourselves feel better by understanding what we cannot understand. Coleridge leaves readers uncertain whether he wants to understand the experience. He expresses instead a desire to re-experience it.

And here, in Coleridge narrating the failure of his imagination, I find a transition to conclude my inquiry: why do Wordsworth and Coleridge not make their dreaming characters adequate to their sublime dream-lands? I think they highlight the fragility of their dreaming narrators in the face of sublime landscapes so that they can draw a parallel between the boundlessness and painful pleasure of sublime landscapes and the boundlessness and painful pleasure of contemplating poetry, both experiences that Marion labels saturated phenomenality because they both give more than we can attend to or understand. Whereas much scholarship of the romantic period sees acts of the imagination and perception as opposed to one another (the tension between empiricism and idealism that Ferguson elaborates), the concept of saturated phenomenality highlights the manner in which they are related for Wordsworth and Coleridge. In the face of art, not as a single work but as a potentiality, they suggest that we experience the same astonishment, the same pleasurable acknowledgement of our own inadequacy, the same sublime emotions as we experience in the face of boundless nature. To make the task of writing poetry seem especially daunting, these poets need to highlight their own smallness. They do this by having the dreamt of landscapes dwarf their narrators, and then they reinforce their smallness by transferring sublime language to their meta-cognitive waking contemplation of art following the dream. In the passages that follow each of these dreams, each poet discusses his doubt about his ability to create art, again reinforcing his smallness, his sensitivity to being sublimely overwhelmed. Awake,

Wordsworth is tempted to suggest that he could carry poetry forward after the manner of the Arab, but then he doubts his ability to pull it off. He says “that I methinks...could share” this errand (V: 159–61), but he’s not too sure. Coleridge stumbles over “could”s and “should”s and “if only then I would”s. Presuming to write the experience of a sublime landscape may seem to be an act of reinstating a Kantian, metacognitive assurance, but by emphasizing the passiveness of their dreamer/poet figures, Wordsworth and Coleridge inscribe within the poems their doubts about the possibility of obtaining such assurance. They emphasize instead the capacity of landscapes and dreams to overwhelm and the capacity of their poetic speakers to be overwhelmed. They are small. They are not quite at home in the sublime task of writing.<sup>8</sup>

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