

Citizen Khan

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We all remember the opening segment of *Citizen Kane*: a closed gate and a 'No Trespassing' sign, mysterious buildings and wandering animals, a glass ball and a snow covered house, the dying Kane's last word: 'Rosebud.' From the assortment of misleading interviews with the people who supposedly knew Kane best, to the closing shot of Rosebud, finally revealed to be a beloved boyhood sled, consumed by flames in a pile of *objets d'art* in the basement of his enormous mansion, all attempts to uncover Kane's motivation fail. Kane is an enigma. One could say that *Citizen Kane* reveals more about why we are attracted to such enigmatic figures than it reveals about Kane himself.

It is not too surprising, then, to find at the beginning of the newsreel section of the film, the opening lines of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan.' This poem too has proved remarkably unyielding to sustained readings beyond its own enigmatic resistance to interpretation. But is that all there is to Coleridge's somewhat bizarre presence in 'News on the March'? The great irony of *Citizen Kane* is that the 'real' meaning of Kane has been there *all the time*, in the legacy of a Colorado goldmine given to him by a boarder in his mother's rooming house, and in his insatiable acquisition of art, newspapers, people, power, and, the ultimate vanity, nature. Like Rosebud, the object of everyone's desire for meaning, these things are just that: things. What lies behind these acquisitions, the film hints, is the 'working man' whom Kane simultaneously defends and betrays. Like the newsreel's featured 'beasts of the jungle and the field' being lifted from ships' holds and onto dockyards, the economic realities of labour, commodity, and capital stand at the root of our cultural and conceptual ideals. In this paper, I want to consider why Welles' allusion to 'Kubla Khan' is a pertinent and correct

interpretation of Coleridge's insights into the problematic relation between economic reality and philosophical consciousness.

A number of studies have demonstrated how aware Coleridge was of the importance and prevalence of political economy. [1] What has not been sufficiently addressed, I think, are Coleridge's broader contributions to a conceptual understanding of economics *tout court* and the difficulty of its relation to its constituent elements. One of the most difficult of these to define is labour; Coleridgeans hardly need reminding of this difficulty. Coleridge's letters and notebooks, not to mention those of his friends and adversaries, are filled with accounts of his toil and trouble in getting ideas from head to print, and there is more spilling of ink over how much work his readers will have to do to get the point. His so-called 'natural indolence' and disdain for the authorial 'Trade' might make us resist thinking of Coleridge as in any way an intellectual labourer. But that is not how he saw it. 'I am in stirrups all day, yea, and sleep in my Spurs,' he wrote to Cottle of his first solo journalistic effort, *The Watchman*, in 1796 (CL 1 192). Coleridge was remarkably honest about his restless inefficiency. Discussing the plan of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge remarks: 'I am aware that I shall be obliged to draw more largely on the reader's attention than so immethodical a miscellany can authorize... I would gladly therefore spare myself and others this *labor*, if I knew without it to present an intelligible statement of my poetic creed' (BL I 88). Such candour is a major impulse of the Coleridgean ethos. Coleridge believed in ideal principles, true, but the task of philosophy is not merely to regurgitate them, but to re-discover them, to 'continually create' them. In the 'Essays on the Principles of Method,' for instance, Coleridge describes the 'labors' of Plato and Bacon as the discovery of "the pure and impersonal reason... freed from the limits, the passions, the prejudices, the peculiar habits of the human understanding, natural or acquired; but above all from the arrogance, which leads man to take the forms and mechanisms of his own mere reflective faculty, as the measure of nature and of Deity" (F 1 490). The efforts of the reason elevate social being above mere exertion. Philosophical labour emancipates the soul.

But surely, when Coleridge, or we for that matter, think of philosophy or poetry as a kind of labour, we are being metaphorical? Well, yes, and that is precisely the point. Labour, Raymond Williams reminds us, has always had two meanings; the relation between these two meanings gives labour its metaphorical character. On one hand, labour is the physical transformation of nature by human effort. If I exert myself merely to transform nature for my own immediate benefit, my labour has no enduring significance. If, on the other hand, I exert myself to make something that I will keep, exchange, or sell, if I produce a commodity, then my labour *also* has significance beyond itself. On this basis, we distinguish labour as physical effort from work as social obligation.[2] When we conceive of physical effort *as* socially obligatory, that is, as having value, then we are invoking an analogy between the transformation of nature by discrete acts of labour and the

general progress of society through the agency of apparent forces, such as production. 'Labour' thus becomes a figure for the units of value that we ascribe to the incremental development of the economy.

This is a complicated and somewhat obscure idea, and it needs to be unpacked. Luckily it keeps cropping up in the long history of economics. For the ancient Greeks, the qualification for citizenship is not simply the ownership of property but also not having to work so that one could devote oneself to affairs of state.^[3] Plato and Aristotle have grave reservations about tyrants because they tend to be motivated by the accumulation of wealth rather than the public good.^[4] The economy as a whole is deemed more important ethically than the labour that drives it. In the classical economic tradition these priorities are reversed. Adam Smith calls 'menial servants' *and* kings, politicians, soldiers, lawyers, churchmen, physicians, men of letters of all kinds, players, buffoons, musicians, opera-singers, opera-dancers etc... 'unproductive labourers' because they 'produce no vendible commodities.'^[5] Smith also opines that philosophers are necessary to the economy because they have the leisure to observe its workings and set it to right. They interpret the entire system as a mighty unseen power—'the invisible hand'—in a way that a labourer, stuck with his specific task in the division of labour, cannot. The philosopher also makes the invisible hand visible by his own work: his memory, his writing. But Smith insists that the grand scheme works according to its own inherent principles and not by virtue of the philosopher's wit. The production of vendible commodities becomes the significant instrument of the system.

Marx both advances and complicates Smith's scheme. He argues that the end of labour is merely its own reproduction, what he calls "labour power." The significance of that reproduction is only evident once it has been harnessed by a social superstructure, the cornerstone of which is the exploitation of labour power to the service of a system of commodity exchange. While it apparently depends upon the existence of a system for its value or significance, the removal of commodities from labour, Marx claims, represents the moment at which systematic or abstract understanding begins. Marxist theorists contend that ideas begin with the abstraction, literally the *setting aside*, of commodities from the scene of their production. With the growth of commerce, first via traded capital and later via money, the abstracted units of distribution and finance come to be seen as signs of utility and value. Standing in a shoe shop, I do not tend to think of the effort that went into making the shoes; I think instead of which shoes will fit and which will look good. I also think about the price of the shoes which already has an independent existence apart from them in my understanding of the mathematic sequence of numbers and the use of money. What this conception omits is the fact that the manufacture and distribution of these commodities precede logically and historically my perception of their relation to the whole economic system.^[6] This omission is what is properly called the 'commodity fetish.'

What I am suggesting is that just as there are two meanings of labour there are two kinds of economies depending on whether one thinks of pain or duty as the deciding factor. The problem is that these economies are easily confused because of the difficult metaphorical relation between labour and its value. This is where Coleridge fits in. I want to suggest that Coleridge is aware of *both* ways of interpreting this relation as it appears in Smithian and Marxist economics. It is fitting that Coleridge, the foremost theorist of the symbol in the English tradition, presents that theory and its correlative theory of allegory in a Sermon intended to inspire the upper classes to decry the influence of political economy. For Coleridge, the trouble with political economy and ‘the general contagion of its mechanic philosophy’ (LS 29) is that it draws theoretical conclusions merely from the contiguity of objects and apparent causes which are then re-applied to other apparent relations between things. Such reasoning is, in the words of *The Statesman’s Manual*, allegorical: ‘Now, an Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses, the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot’ (LS 30). Allegories are the result of the abstraction, the setting aside, of objects as they exist in the world into contingent and ephemeral relations with each other which then take on the role of permanent significances or values. Things have significance as much as they represent or are equivalent to other things, like the images of a ‘picture-language.’ The same process is evident in the famous description of the fancy in chapter 13 of the *Biographia Literaria*: ‘FANCY... has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space, and blended with and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we call by the word CHOICE’. We select, we prefer, we choose, we fancy, economists today repeatedly claim. And, for the most part, this is how we think.

As a corrective to allegorical abstraction, Coleridge offers symbolic reasoning. A symbol, Coleridge famously says, ‘always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living Part in that Unity, of which it is the representative’ (LS 30). A symbolic consciousness of work means that one perceives one’s actions as contributions to the greater unity of the whole economy and not merely in terms of the aggregate value of abstracted commodities.^[7] This active mental agency moderating work could, Coleridge claimed, function across social classes and economic enterprises. “From the cotters’ hearth or the workshop of the artisan, to the palace of the arsenal,” Coleridge writes in the first ‘Essay on Method’

the first merit, that which admits neither substitute nor equivalent, is, that *every thing is in its place*. Where this charm is wanting, every other merit either loses its name, or becomes an additional ground of accusation and regret. Of one, by whom

it is eminently possessed, we say proverbially, he is like clock-work. The resemblance extends beyond the point of regularity, and yet falls short of the truth. Both do, indeed, at once divide and announce the silent and otherwise indistinguishable lapse of time. But the man of methodical industry and honorable pursuits... realizes its ideal divisions and gives character to its moments. If the idle are described as killing time, he may be justly said to call it into life and moral being, while he makes it the distinct object not only of the consciousness, but of the conscience. (F 1 450)

There need be no difference between unproductive and productive labour in Smith's sense because all acts of production are also conscious acts of social integration, that is, acts of symbolic interpretation. And with this consciousness, Coleridge claimed, we could return to a state of natural sufficiency and communal harmony.

Coleridge makes this symbolic consciousness the basis for a mode of self-restricted production. There is no surplus, no accumulation, no distribution which is not mediated by everyone's awareness of its necessity. As early as his 1795 lectures on the slave trade, subsequently revised and published in issue 4 of *The Watchman*, Coleridge urged the limitation of consumer desire through the recognition of the difference between necessary labour, the "*toil*... which is necessary only as *Exercise*" and the excess labour necessary to create a surplus of luxury goods, particularly sugar and rum. [8] A similar consciousness underlies Coleridge's faith in the paper money system instituted by the Pitt government after the Bank of England's suspension of gold payments in 1797. The economy requires neither gold currency nor even gold coin, Coleridge argued in his 1811 editorials on the bullion controversy; paper signs for exchange are enough when every economic act is a sign for the economic potential of every other. In the second Lay Sermon, this awareness is orientated toward the sufficiency of circulation: 'the National Debt' can and does provide a nexus of economic potential through the constant cycle of commodities and exchange media from one hand to another. The defining social concept of Coleridge's later years, the clerisy, is a further medium of the contemplation of the economic symbolism, through the mechanism of the national church and its humanistic educational agenda, which instills this sense of economic power without having to address at all the questions of currency, debt, and labour.[9]

And yet, as much as Coleridge hoped that the economy could be sustained through symbolic reasoning alone he was also aware of the allegorical character of commodity exchange and its effect on human understanding. In April, 1818, Coleridge wrote two, possibly three pamphlets, and a number of editorials and letters in support of Robert Peel's Bill to regulate the employment of children in the manufacture of cotton.[10] The central issue which Coleridge addresses in these

pamphlets is 'free labour,' the idea that the worker's contract with his employer is made in full cognizance of its implications, both economic and material. For Coleridge, the notion that people forced by economic misery to turn to factory labour are in any way free to judge their inclinations makes no sense. What has happened is that the abstract idea of the free relations between commodities, that anything is ultimately equivalent to an amount of anything else, has been superimposed or transplanted into a conception of the relations between effort and obligation. In a memorandum on Peel's Bill, Coleridge notes:

Wretched enough, I doubt not, are too many of the Houses, i.e. Pig sties, in which men debased into animals without instinct, hovel together—Thus it is ever—Effects are adduced in defence of their Causes. Make a man a beast by your treatment of him, and then bring forward his bestiality as the justification of the treatment.—This Sophism is as old as the Quarrel between the good and the evil Will—. And the heaviest weight on the part of those, who are the advocates of Justice and common Humanity, is the necessity of answering over and over again the same—not arguments, but—brazen assertions of their opponents. It is a cheap victory, says an old Divine, if the Devil may be allowed to employ the sword, and we be prevented from using the same buckler.—But alas! such is the present state of our Nature, as to attest daily the truth of Lord Bacon's aphorism. Lie boldly, and persevere in repeating it, with an affected ignorance of its repeated detection—and the World will be disposed, part to believe you, and part to doubt, ~~both as being as~~ till the hour of decisive action is passed by. (SWF 724)

We might recognize such arbitrariness as the rhetorical manifestation of allegory. Indeed, Coleridge himself had to be careful of such allegorical misapplication. In a satiric letter written in collaboration with William Mudford, editor of *The Courier*, and published on May 31, 1818 Coleridge parodies the arguments of the defenders of child labour: 'First, then, I trust, your readers will readily admit, that the inconvenience of a *part* ought in every case to yield to the advantage of the *whole*; and if so, why the mischievous outcry about these helpless children, as they are called?' (EOT 2 485) This is precisely the kind of thinking—that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts—that we are familiar with in Coleridge's symbolism.

What is striking about these pamphlets is not only Coleridge's sympathy for the plight of the children but the extent to which he confronts the pervasive allegorical logic of economic processes. On April 28, 1818, Coleridge writes in his notebook that he has just seen 'some kind of Tinker or Itinerant' in front of the Highgate baker's shop. He carries a sign which reads: "The rich won't part with any thing and the Poor have nothing to part with." He responds:

What is the present state? Great oppression on the part of the Rich, in their individual callings, or work day character—ex. gr. the Water Companies in London, the Bank of England, the Cotton Factors, the Corn-Manimists—Great Subscription *Charities*, or Sunday Work—Bible &c &c—On the part of the Poor clubbing, debauchery, sedition, loss of all private & all public social duties. How shall an honest man... ? If he exposes the former wickedness, he appears to address & is in actual danger of feeding the latter! (CN III 4406)

About a year later, he revisits his child labour work again:

Feb. 25, 1819. Highgate: after reperusal of my inefficient yet not feeble Efforts in behalf of the poor little white slaves in the Cotton factories:-

But <still> are we not still better than that the other Nations of Christendom? Yes—perhaps—I don't know—I dare not affirm it. Better than the French, certainly! Mammon versus Moloch and Belial. But Sweden, Norway, Germany, *the Tyrol*?—No. (CN III 4482)

It seems as if conscience, as well as consciousness, in the form of interpretation and reasoning is only so much wasted labour. The associative thinking of economic accumulation and distribution—poverty and wealth—haunts Coleridge, even in the assemblage of these two desperate entries, as the spectre of commodity abstraction within his own moral understanding of the economy.

I am not attributing the discovery of the commodity fetish to Coleridge. It does seem, however, that he anticipates some of its implications for the relation between the economic realities of modern life and the forms of psychological and philosophical reasoning we use to understand it. Coleridge does discover, I think, that an economy can be conceived of in two ways, symbolically and allegorically, but that these two general conceptions do not sit very well together. All of this is articulated in 'Kubla Khan.' The question implied by the opening lines of the poem, 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/ A stately pleasure dome decree' is not which Romantic period tyrant Kubla represents but rather who actually builds the dome? The implication is that the building of the pleasure dome depends upon the existence of a mass labour force, a force *conspicuously* absent from the poem and replaced by the logical process of a conceptually abstract economy. The opening stanza presents us with a paradox, the centre of which is the logical connective 'so' at the beginning of line 6. The logic of the stanza suggests a causal relation between Khan's decree and the existence of the garden. This causality announces

in turn the universal efficacy of articulated ideas, like decrees. This efficacy is further reflected in connotations of the divine ontology of the river ('sacred' 'Alph') and the negation of material notions of quantity ('measureless') and perception ('sunless') in the midst of immediate and geographical knowledge, the 'here' and 'there' through which the garden attains its poetic existence.

The second stanza repeats this double logic. The 'deep romantic chasm,' the 'savage place' from where 'with ceaseless turmoil seething... A mighty fountain momentarily was forced;/ Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst/ Huge fragments vaulted" which 'flung up momentarily the sacred river' invokes a kind of Satanic creative intensity within the Khan's garden. But what is notable about the stanza is how much this creative process is *figured* by the speaker. The chasm is only 'as holy and enchanted,' we are told, in as much 'As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted/ by woman wailing for her demon-lover!.' The fountain bursts from the chasm only 'As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing.' Most tellingly, the 'fragments vaulted *like* rebounding hail,/ Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail.' And there are more subdued metaphors: 'savage,' 'dancing,' 'sacred.' All together, these images describe a total conception of the power of nature. But that symbolic reading is the result of an accumulation of associations which, at the same time, retain a rather forthright sense of their isolation in the insistence that all this is happening 'momently' and 'half-intermittent-[ly].' That is, each image is itself a fanciful impression of an event and it is only by being yoked together that they relate any whole experience. Most telling is the image of the thresher's flail: not simply the grain but the act of harvesting it has significance when it is associated with the narrative of the river's progress.

What I am suggesting is that the logic of Coleridge's poem shares its metaphorical character with the logic of commodity abstraction. The sheer volume of figuration upon figuration marks 'Kubla Khan' as a poem about the origin of that symbolic character in the accumulation and abstraction of commodities. The poem avows its own economic production as much as it disavows the construction of the dome. The final section incorporates these natural forces into concepts of pleasure, prophesy, and music. But the poet's wish to 'build that dome in air' is an act of appropriation rendered obviously political, not to mention colonial, by the specifically racial connotations of the Abyssinian maid and by the fact that he wants not to decree the dome, but to *build* it. On the one hand, the wish presents a sympathetic bridge between labour and the imagination. On the other, the poem demonstrates that this transcendence is always already figurative. Not only is there a disjunction between intellectual ideals and material labour but also any attempt to manifest intellectual action as a guide to how that labour might proceed is based, historically and logically, on the association of manufactured commodities.

That Coleridge is recalling his involvement in the slavery debates in the 1790s or in Peel's child labour reforms when he writes and revises 'Kubla Khan' is, admittedly, a matter for debate. Nevertheless, the proximity of Coleridge's poetic,

philosophical, and economic thought is suggested in the compositional note which he appended to it on publication. Regardless of who the man from Porlock is, what Coleridge tells us is that he is ‘a person on business’ and that his interruption caused the great vision inspired by Purchas to be lost. But what is that vision? ‘[T]he most vivid confidence that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines, 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 sensations or consciousness of effort’ (CP 249-50). This is poetry without labour, the imaginative ideal, but Coleridge conceives of it in terms of a ‘production’ whereby images become things to represent other things. Kevin Barry proposed that ‘Kubla Khan’ is a poem about money.^[11] I prefer to think of it as a more exploratory poem about the ironies and implications of the kind of economy a monetary system implies. Coleridge’s poetics is as much the symptom of capitalism as it is an insightful exposé of its contradictions—as I think Orson Welles, for one, clearly understood.

[1] See William Kennedy, *Humanist vs. Idealist: The Economic Thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Westport: Greenwood, 1958); Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge’s Critical Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1988); John Morrow, *Coleridge’s Political Thought: Property, Morality and the Limits of Traditional Discourse* (London: Macmillan, 1990); David Simpson, Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain 1750-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978), 298-306.

[2] See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958) 79-92.

[3] Arendt 81.

[4] For a discussion of the importance of Greek economics for literary theory, see Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), ch. 1-3.

[5] *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 192.

[6] See for instance Alfred Sohn-Rethet, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

[7] Coleridge believed that the social significance of thought depends upon a conscious perception of these symbolic potentialities. The reason, what Coleridge thought of as the seat of the vital transcendent ‘ideas’ or ‘energies,’ exists wholly in the mind. But it can

be perceived by the understanding as essentially real, and these perceptions provide an interface between the universe of eternity and the world of experience. This conscious effort fulfils the duties one perceives through the intersection of divine law and social experience, what Coleridge called 'rights.'

[8] As Tim Morton suggests, however, the "blood-sugar" argument which Coleridge borrows to instill in his already sympathetic, abstemious audience a sense of horror at the reification of slave labour is itself grounded in the possibility that blood and sugar–labour and product–are interchangeable, while, Coleridge contrarily insists, they could never be so in abolitionist economy. See "Blood Sugar" in *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire 1780-1830* ed. Tim Fulford and Peter Kitson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 92.

[9] See Phil Connell, *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 158-59.

[10] For an account of Coleridge's involvement in the child labour reform movement see Charles DePaolo "Coleridge on Child-Labour Reform," *Charles Lamb Bulletin* 47 (1984): 187-194. For an insightful discussion of the Romantics' general interest in the early labour movement and the problems which the Romantic presence in the competing discourses of reform bore on the reform movement see Robert Gray, "The languages of factory reform in Britain 1830-1860" in *The Historical Meanings of Work*, edited by Patrick Joyce (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 143-179. The most comprehensive account of the child labour reform movement, its inspirations and disasters remains E. P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1959), 331-49.

[11] "Paper Money and English Romanticism: Literary Side-Effects of the Last Invasion of Britain", *Times Literary Supplement* 21 Feb. 1971, 14-16.