Enchantment Poetics: Two Studies on Magical Thinking and Poetry

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Enchantment Poetics: Two Studies on Magical Thinking and Poetry by Michael Benjamin Shufro, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English Literature at San Francisco State University.

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While the study of magic is little understood or discussed among academics today, the knowledge born of magical thought has had profound historical influence on the humanities. Perhaps more than anything else, poetry’s resemblance to spells and verbal charms demonstrates this, as well as the continual interest by innumerable poets in enchantment and magical themes. The introduction further elaborates upon this notion and contextualizes my relationship to the subject matter and my approach to writing about it. The following two chapters each consider the relationship of magic to the work of one poet, the first being Christopher Smart (1722-1771) and the latter, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Both studies speculate that magical modes of thought enable poems to integrate the often divisive politics that distinguish the secular from the sacred. The coda reflects on this divide and considers the absence of magic in academic discussion as a possible contributor to the divisive spirit haunting the liberal arts today.
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Introduction: Lines and Symbols

In the search for a particular cause to this thesis, I am reminded of some lines by Pablo Neruda, who tells us, “Poetry arrived / in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where / it came from” (“Poetry”). While this thesis is most certainly not poetry, it is largely about poetry; and, like Neruda, while I cannot quite articulate what first caused my life to be pulled toward poetry, such magnetism is indisputable. My earliest memories of poetry seem entangled with my grandparents, a pair of Jewish librarians who spent the bulk of the twentieth century in and around New York, before retiring in California to be closer to my family. Every holiday, they presented me with new rhythmical figures: *Mother Goose*, Maurice Sendak, Shel Silverstein, Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg. I was fed poetry from a young age. My grandmother had a deep love for oral traditions and the reading aloud of poetry, and my grandfather seemed to involve all in his midst with qualities of patience. I’ve no memory of ever talking about poetry with my him, yet, strangely, in my thoughts, he is always full of its quiet electricity. His father, who came of age in Lithuania, descended from thirteen consecutive generations of rabbis. The bulk of their poetry came from Judaic scripture, folk songs, and folktales—as was almost certainly the case for my grandmother’s parents from Romania and Moldova, and my mother’s grandparents, also Jewish, who lived in Germany and Poland, up until the Holocaust. While I have always known that such histories carry on through me, the work of this thesis revealed my own sense of poetry to involve this cultural transmission far more than I had ever grasped.

Perhaps this thesis simply began as an attempt to wrestle with those age-old questions: What is poetry? Why does one read and write poems? What are poets attempting to achieve?
While, at some unknown juncture in my education, I discovered that all the arts—poetry, dance, painting, music, drama, etc.—originally involved sacred rituals and meanings, the idea that my own interest in poetry was the product of a specific religious history was far more confounding. During the one or two times a year my family would go to temple when I was growing up, always upon my grandmother’s requisition, my father and I would hide scraps of paper in our bibles and play tic tac toe, pretending all through the service to be reading along with the others. Sure, we were there to acknowledge and respect our cultural history, but we were, or so it then seemed, no more religious than our mischievous game-playing. Where religion, compared to the secular revelations of modern science, represented orthodoxy and outmoded beliefs for both my father and me at that time, poetry was then simply a kind of play for us, and it largely stood for little other than the sheer pleasure we took in its rhyme schemes and the pleasurable freedom it allowed for our own personal expression. One might say it had the purity of innocence about it. Yet the more my passion for poetry grew, the more I could see this lyrical playroom involved serious work. I learned poets were just as likely, if not more so, to navigate territories of gravity as those of levity—and, paradoxically, it seemed, the more I came to know about poetry, the more difficult it became for me to treat it with a playful nature. I read philosopher-poets, such as George Santayana, who went so far as to claim, “religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs” (v). With such notions in mind, this thesis strives to hold at once, and perhaps attempts to unify, my father’s playful sense of poetry with the weightier poetical sensibilities of those rabbis from long ago.

After many years of contemplating this midway point, and considering it a great deal as I read many kinds of poetry and wrote some verses of my own, I gradually came to find that what
enabled such disparate perspectives to possess a mutual appreciation for poetry was a more general experience of verbal enchantment. Children, secular lay folk, theoretical neuroscientists, theologians, and, seemingly, everybody in between, all have felt possessed by a particular and mysterious form of wonder through poetry. Writ large, the subject of this thesis is therefore a prosaic exploration of such poetical enchantment, as well as a consideration of the role of this magico-religious mode in the more general, modern, secularized experience of poetry. In my research, I found the study of magic to be a difficult topic to broach from nearly every academic standpoint. Like poetry, it resists simple paraphrase; likewise, magic tends to resist interpretation through the reductive frame of a scientific narrative, such as those espoused by social scientists, neuroscientists, and cosmologists. As I will demonstrate throughout the thesis, magical systems rely upon the opacity and mystery of the unknown in order for their meanings to make sense. Equally, like the great majority of poets and artists, who tend to be far more invested in the praxis than the theory of their art form, most practitioners of magic are not interested in deconstructing their craft for the general public. Indeed, it inherently goes against the magician’s creed to reveal the secrets of their power. Factors such as these led me to take a position that was both quite challenging to navigate as well as quite liberating, in that I felt my exploration was not wholly constrained by or predicated upon standard academic conventions.

From the first steps into this endeavor, a seemingly insurmountable number of questions confronted me regarding the epistemological relationship between poetry and magic. Moreover, my conclusions have so radically altered throughout the work that on multiple occasions I have felt compelled to rewrite whole major sections of it. I therefore have found myself less driven by answers than by the discourse such questions frame, and this thesis is therefore shaped less by
argument and more by wonder and consideration. The questions I have found most central to this discourse are notably broad: What is the fundamental relationship between poets and magicians? How are they similar and how are they different? How do poets establish magical systems in their poetry and poetics? How much can one identify a shared magical poetics among poets? How does poetry function as an applied art of magical thought compared to technology functioning as an applied science of rational thought? Why do many of our most celebrated poets turn to writing about magic and play with language as a form of sorcery? How does poetry offer a way of knowing and to what degree does it require a particular knowledge system or value system in order to be understood? In the two studies on the two poets that follow this introduction, I have used these questions as guideposts and points of reference to establish a sense of boundary and context throughout the work as a whole. Idealistically, this thesis will show how poetical enchantment not only creates the means by which a secular reader can participate in a sacred discourse through poetry, but also how it creates the means by which a sacred reader can participate in a secular discourse through poetry. Realistically, I hope it shows, if nothing else, that such discourses are alive and significant and can be accessed by any and all who feel that signature spark of curiosity when such ideas and wonders possess them.

In fact, while it seems no singular lens or theory has thus far encapsulated the general relationship between poetry and magic, a tremendous amount of literature has recognized and examined many specific aspects of their similitude. Perhaps the broadest and most striking sphere of comparison has been observed through magic’s general relationship to language. Roy Peter Clark argues magic is hard-baked into our experience of grammar:
The bridge between the words *glamour* and *grammar* is magic. According to the *OED*, *glamour* evolved from *grammar* through an ancient association between learning and enchantment. There was a time when grammar described not just language knowledge but all forms of learning, which in a less scientific age included things like magic, alchemy, astrology, even witchcraft. (16-17)

Clark labors the point further by quoting Evan Morris on this matter:

“Glamour” and “Grammar” are essentially the same word. In classical Greek and Latin, “grammar” (from the Greek “gram- matikos,” meaning “of letters”) covered the whole of arts and letters, i.e., high knowledge in general. In the Middle Ages, “grammar” was generally used to mean “learning,” which at the time included, at least in the popular imagination, a knowledge of magic. The narrowing of “grammar” to mean “the rules of language” was a much later development, first focusing on Latin, and only in the 17th century extended to the study of English and other languages.

Meanwhile, “grammar” had percolated into Scottish English (as “gramarye”), where an “1” was substituted for an “r” and the word eventually became “glamour,” used to mean specifically knowledge of magic and spells. (17)

The word *grimoire*, the term for “a magician's manual for invoking demons, etc.”¹ also notably shares etymological kinship with the word *grammar*. And such texts are also notably filled with spells, “a set of words, a formula or verse, supposed to possess occult or magical powers” [emphasis added] (OED); and it is quite difficult to in fact linguistically distinguish precisely what separates verbal spells, charms, and incantations from songs and poems. The word *spell* of course also means “to make (one's way) letter by letter,” and, more generally, “to make out, understand, decipher, or comprehend” (OED); and this is synonymous with what it means to

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¹ From Owen Davies’ *Magic: A Very Short Introduction*: The term ‘grimoire’ to describe such books of magic only came into regular usage in 18th-century France, and was subsequently widely adopted in English literature [....] The origins of these handbooks or manuals of magic date right back to early antiquity. Compilations of spells and incantations recorded on clay tablets have been found at Middle Eastern archaeological sites dating to the early centuries of the 1st millennium BCE. Their subsequent development rested on the introduction of new literary technologies. At the same time, new technologies became imbued with magical properties. This was a potent combination. So the use of papyrus as a writing surface enabled metres of text to be rolled up into a portable record of information. This allowed coherent, sequential, explanatory handbooks of magic to be stored and passed on. An entire body of accumulated magical wisdom could be encoded and transported by one person. Papyrus also allowed for different inks with different properties to be used for magical effect. (78)
read (e.g. “to consider, interpret, discern” (OED)); and the word read is cognate with the magical genre of the riddle, both of which stem from “rǣdan,” meaning “to interpret and understand the meaning of written symbols” (4,981, Century Dictionary). Douglas Harper has traced these words to the Proto-Indo-European root “re-” which he translates as “to reason, count” and shows it to be the base for, along with read, riddle, and reason, the words rite, ritual and rhyme (Online Etymology Dictionary). Even the semantic drift of the word verb, which shares the same Indo-European base as word (OED), has embodied magical significance across its usage, such as when it has signified to “summon,” as well as to participate in a “covenant” (6725, Century Dictionary). The Oxford English Dictionary even defines the word semantic first as “relating to divination through the interpretation of signs,” and then as “of or relating to (the study of) meaning in language,” as well “relating to meaning (of any kind).” From a linguistic perspective, the associations between magic, poetry, and language can thus appear so embedded in one another, it is hardly possible to tell them apart. I therefore often reference etymological sources throughout the thesis, such as those referenced above, as well as Michiel De Vaan’s *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages*. I have also relied heavily upon linguistic works to guide me, such as Leilani Cook’s *How Charms Work: A Pragmatic Approach to Old, Middle, and Modern English Charms* and Jonathan Roper’s 2003 article “Towards a Poetics, Rhetoric and Proxemics of Verbal Charms.”

Alongside historical linguistics, another broad sphere of knowledge that has provided context to this project has occurred through exploring how historians have framed the concept of magic in modern terms. One central component which informs the modern, secular experience, as Charles Taylor shows in *A Secular Age* (2007), involves “the enchanted world […] of spirits,
demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in” (26). Taylor devotes nearly nine hundred pages to attempting to answer the enormous question, “why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?” (25). While he argues that God and magic should not be conflated as synonymous terms, the secular stance toward both can only be properly understood in his view through historically outlining how the western world transitioned from a worldview of enchantment to one of disenchantment:

[…] it is a crucial fact of our present spiritual predicament that it is historical; that is, our understanding of ourselves and where we stand is partly defined by our sense of having come to where we are, of having overcome a previous condition. Thus we are widely aware of living in a “disenchanted” universe; and our use of this word bespeaks our sense that it was once enchanted. More, we are not only aware that it used to be so, but also that it was a struggle and an achievement to get to where we are; and that in some respects this achievement is fragile. We know this because each one of us as we grew up has had to take on the disciplines of disenchantment, and we regularly reproach each other for our failings in this regard, and accuse each other of “magical” thinking, of indulging in “myth”, of giving way to “fantasy”; we say that X isn’t living in our century, that Y has a “mediaeval” mind, while Z, whom we admire, is way ahead of her time. In other words, our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got there. In that sense, there is an inescapable (though often negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age. And just because we describe where we are in relating the journey, we can misdescribe it grievously by misidentifying the itinerary [...]. To get straight where we are, we have to go back and tell the story properly. Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can’t do justice to where we come from. (28-9)

Throughout the thesis I have attempted to show how this historically distinct, modern, and “fragile” narrative struggle between enchantment and disenchantment is mirrored in the linguistic struggle to distinguish poetry from magic spells. While Owen Davies’ writings have perhaps grounded the historical context of this thesis more than any other work, I have also
found my inquiries requiring the insights of religious historians, such as Mircea Eliade and Arthur Vesluius; science historians, such as Morris Berman and William Whewell; and cultural historians, such as Eric Hobsbawm and Donald Engels. Ideally, such variant historical references shall more than anything else provide the reader with a loose sense for the history of consciousness regarding my subject, which considers the enchanted “poetic state”\(^2\) as much as it does the cultural conventions that have established the behaviors of modernity’s poetry.

While one could likely write on the history of this “poetic state” during just about any time period or place, I have chosen to focus solely upon two poets from the eighteenth and nineteenth century: Christopher Smart (1722-1771) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 - 1834). Initially, I had a third study on Emily Dickinson, and I had hoped to include studies on more recent poets as well; however, partway into the development of this thesis, I turned away from such pursuits in order to devote my attention more thoroughly to the writings of these two poets. The reason why this time period is of such particular significance to my investigation is because across these near one hundred years one can observe through their poetry both a partially embodied sense of the magico-religious consciousness of the medieval and Renaissance worlds that preceded it, as well as the partial embodiment of the modern scientific consciousness that we recognize as our own today. It is from a certain vantage a period of half-states, intellectually compressed with equal occurrences of cultural dreaming and awakening, and in this way, to

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\(^2\) In “Poetry and Abstract Thought,” French poet Paul Valery writes “A poem, in fact, is a kind of machine for producing the poetic state by means of words. That machine's effect is uncertain, for nothing is certain in the matter of action on minds. But whatever may be the result and its uncertainty, the machine's construction requires the solution of many problems. If the expression 'machine' shocks you, if my mechanized analogy seems crude, please note that while even a very short poem's composition may extend over a period of years, the poem's action on a reader is accomplished in just a few minutes. In a few minutes the reader will receive the shock of discoveries, comparisons, flashes of expression gathered during months of research, waiting, patience and impatience. He will be able to attribute to inspiration much more than it can give” [emphasis added] (231).
some degree, it historically represents that poetic middle-state between levity and gravity that I considered earlier. It therefore has served as a useful historical starting point from which this thesis attempts to examine many of the conventions that are often represented in discourses on poetry and magic today.

In order to make sense of these broad and sweeping conventions, as well as the complicated epistemological interplay between poetry and magic, I have gleaned insights from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy, as well as neuroscience. While I certainly cast a long view on the history of knowledge throughout the thesis, and therefore make reference to pre-Enlightenment figures such as Shakespeare and Plato, the vast majority of referenced thinkers follow the Romantic movement. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were perhaps no less formative periods for western philosophy than the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were for western poetry. The initial developers of today’s social sciences from this period, such as anthropologist James Frazer and sociologist Emile Durkheim, examined the experience of magic in a pre-Freudian context and therefore drew as much upon philosophy and history as science in order to substantiate their theories. Equally, I have found one may best understand theories of magic from psychoanalytic thinkers such as Freud and Jung through balancing them alongside the findings of modern philosophers, such as those of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Such interdisciplinary approaches are crucial to accessing the dialogism of poetic enchantment and have contributed significantly to the conclusions I have found across each study. Among all such thought-work, I am likely most indebted to the French philosopher-anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl for his theory of mystical mentality, which has come nearer than anything else to providing a general framework for magical consciousness across this thesis.
In this respect, I am also indebted to Susan Greenwood’s *Anthropology of Magic* (2007), which introduced me to Lévy-Bruhl’s work and also provided extensive and convincing reasoning to the notion that, more than anything else, “magic is an aspect of consciousness” (12).

Whether turning to science, history, philosophy or art in order to clarify some unclear juncture between poetry and magic in this study, I have continuously strived to ground all my general interrogations in prior magico-poetical discourses, as well as in the particular ongoing critical discourses surrounding the works I’m examining. Much of my early research was built upon Sydney Musgrove’s article “Poetry and Magic” (1946) and established the literary-critical means through which I was able to explore this territory far more broadly. Professor Summer Star, who has been a guiding force throughout this thesis, and has written on Victorian poetry’s relationship to enchantment and affect, introduced me to Herbert Tucker’s article “After Magic: Modern Charm in History, Theory, and Practice” (2017). Tucker has perhaps come closest to articulating a theoretical domain or lens through which future scholarship can be established. Notably, his arguments are built upon Thomas Greene’s collection of essays *Poetry, Signs, and Magic* (2005). Other notable works that have greatly influenced the thought-work throughout this thesis are Northrop Frye’s *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (1976) and Anya Taylor’s *Magic and English Romanticism* (1976). Each of these works have been central to my exploration and at numerous points along the way have enabled me to make connections where I was otherwise blind. Equally, while I comment on a range of other

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3 Musgrove argues that magic and poetry “are among the oldest [activities] practised by mankind, and the existence of a connection is apparent even on a superficial view [...] when one considers the essentially irrational nature of each, the use of rhythm as an organic component in each, [and] the similarity of the relationship of rhapsode and shaman to their respective audiences” (102).
scholars’ works throughout these studies, each study is largely built on one scholar’s work who I take to be that poet’s foremost critic. In this respect, Karina Williamson’s writings have greatly influenced my study on Smart as have John Beer’s writings in my study on Coleridge.

While there are numerous correspondences between these two studies, each stands alone and is meant to be received on its own terms. That said, I have arranged the studies in chronological order of the poets’ lifetimes in an attempt to establish some sense of historical continuity. Therefore, the first, titled “‘Converted Sorcerer Rejoice!’: Interpretative Magic in *Jubilate Agno,*” examines the relationship of poetry to magic in Christopher Smart’s long lyrical fragment by looking at a range of ways in which Smart not only references magic throughout the poem but consciously endows the words with magico-religious significance. Unlike Coleridge, Smart altogether precedes the Romantic movement, and thus such a work affords an opportunity for modern readers to experience the charm of a religious poet with magical beliefs who was writing in an age that was still riding out the initial shockwaves of the Scientific Revolution, and therefore was part of a more enchanted world than the poets to succeed him. Yet just as poets and thinkers today struggle with magico-religious sentiments, so I show at length how Smart struggles with secular sentiments and uses magic to transform this aspect of the profane into opportunities for sacred encounters. In order to demonstrate this, I provide a lengthy close reading of the poems’ most well-known “Jeoffry” passage and thereafter consider how *Jubilate Agno* encourages one to reconsider the sacro-secular boundaries that are generally used to distinguish charms from both psalms and poetry.

In the study that follows this, titled ‘Beware! Beware!’: “Kubla Khan” and Coleridge’s Magical Poetics of Crisis,” I devote the majority of my attention to Coleridge’s lyrical fragment
“Kubla Khan, Or a Vision in a Dream: a Fragment,” while also considering more broadly a selection of his other poetry, such as “The Eolian Harp” and “Rime of the Ancient of Mariner.” Although critics have written extensively on the magical philosophies of other poets, such as Yeats and Blake, there is arguably no modern lyric poem that has received so much attention as a work of poetical enchantment as “Kubla Khan.” I therefore provide a lengthy background to this critical discourse, and examine this centuries-long exegesis as a representative discourse for modern poetry and magic more broadly. For this reason, the study occupies the core of the thesis and runs to nearly twice the length of the study on Smart. Throughout, I explore a range of differing, often contradicting, views on the poem—attempting to distinguish nonsense from sense and magic from mysticism, in the process—and try to find their common source, ultimately suggesting that what frames this discourse seems to be the inherent struggle of strong readers to possess both the disenchantment of criticism as well as the enchantment of poesis. Magic in Coleridge’s poetry, I therefore suggest, appears to lack any overall sense of security in a sacred or secular context, other than through the fleeting embodiment of poetry. “Kubla Khan” I thus argue frames the act of poetry as a paradoxical container and conduit for religious experiences in a secular age. In order to demonstrate this, I provide a lengthy close reading of “Kubla Khan” and consider Levy-Bruhl's theory of mystical mentality to the work.

Together, the aim of these studies is to show that magic and poetry represent two distinct knowledge-systems that are far more interconnected than most people realize. Throughout the thesis, I therefore attempt to show how these two kinds of knowledge differ from the cognitive experience of religion and science. However, it must be admitted that all modern scholars rely to some degree on scientific knowledge. How, for instance could any academic today refer to
magic and literature without any reference to linguistics, sociology, psychology, archeology, political science, and so forth? Equally, magic, as I will show, arises out of complex religious dynamics that are continuing to play out to this day. This thesis thus frames poetry and magic as a kind of restless consciousness that is in an endless struggle between these secular and sacred modes of thought. This struggle demarcates the limits of this thesis; it frames my attempt to picture the nature of poetry as a magical invocation as well as the nature of magical invocations as poetic acts. While I have focused upon Smart and Coleridge in order to illustrate this dynamic, my readers should be able to apply many of the magico-poetical associations established in these pages to just about any poem, from ancient lyrical works to those lines that are just being penned by the many poets among us today. These examinations should not therefore be read as studies on works that possess a distinct kind of magic on their own; rather, *Jubilate Agno* and “Kubla Khan” exemplify the reality that there are inherent magical aspects to anybody’s experience of poetry, be it a nursery rhyme or the song of a mystic philosopher.
Chapter 1. Converted Sorcerer Rejoice!’: Interpretative Magic in Jubilate Agno

The strange cosmos of Christopher Smart’s *Jubilate Agno* imagines all things as inhabiting and being charged with a feeling of ongoing magic. While the sun and moon carry out their age-old alchemy, “together in the spirit every night like man and wife” (B319).\(^4\) Smart’s feline companion Jeoffry conducts rituals reminiscent of a Sufi mystic, “wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness” (B698). Long-dead saints are addressed as though living, as when the poem’s imperative voice proclaims, “Let Peter rejoice with the MOON FISH” (B123), and the plots of “wizards and witches” are repeatedly alluded to as still unfolding (B300). Here, “flowers are worked by perpetual moving spirits” (B501), and flies (A95), gnats (A96), and even the “mighty” unicorn (A26) are presented as necessary participants in the ceremonies of priests. Rocks are riddles of occult energy. We are told, for instance, “a TOAD can dwell in the centre of a stone” (B412); of one particular mineral, it is said, “this is fixed fire” (D64); another, “a gem supposed by the ancients to have magical effects” (D51). Smart elaborates upon this last observation with the utterance, “Star—word—herb—gem,” a phrase which signifies that language also plays a hand in the universe’s copious transfigurations.

*Jubilate Agno* can therefore be read as magical text,\(^5\) and such possibility is marvelous because it dares to let us feel that we too are participants in the rhythms of its fantastic energies. But how are we to make sense of such magic for ourselves? Should we distil it as some of the eighteenth century’s most wondrous esoterica, as Karina Williamson has considered, speculating

\(^4\) Smart scholars generally agree that *Jubilate Agno* comprises four distinct fragments. Line number citations will therefore reflect the approach of past editors by beginning with either an A,B,C or D.

\(^5\) To be clear, this is not mere writing about magic but text that embodies magical properties.
upon the cryptic phrase quoted above as shorthand for occultist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa’s “system of universal correspondences” (Smart, 1980, xxvi)? While such an interpretation has promise due to Smart’s known familiarity with Hermeticism, Kabbalah, and Freemasonry—occult traditions which Agrippa heavily draws upon in his own writings—it has even greater appeal when considering the poem’s far more overt Christian themes. Agrippa, who “represents in many ways the epitome of the Renaissance occult scholar,” was also a devout Christian and believed magic was a key means by which to access the divine (Miles, 436-37). Such connections suggest Jubilate’s otherworld beguilements may very well involve occult religious functions that correspond with the poem’s intense evangelism, as when its author candidly declares, “For I preach the very GOSPEL OF CHRIST” (B9). No interpretation of Jubilate Agno can rightly ignore its religiosity. Smart wrote the work after some ecstatic prayers in a public commons got him locked away in an asylum for seven years. He tells us, “For I blessed God in St. James’s Park till I routed all the company,” and, thus, “the officers of the peace are at variance with me, and the watchman smites me with his staff” (B89-90). Scripture provides the bones for the text’s sprawling body. Biblical figures flood its more than twelve hundred lines, and scholars have established its general structure to be rooted in the canticles, namely the Benedicite and the Magnificat, as well as the Biblical psalms. We may therefore interpret magical junctures in Jubilate Agno as religious turning points too. A larger study of Smart’s

6 In Agrippa’s theory, “the occult virtues of all things in the natural world are transmitted into their material forms through the medium of the "Soul of the World," which in turn receives the higher forms of the virtues from the rays of the stars so that by this spirit "every occult property is conveyed into Hearbs [herbs], Stones, Metals, and Animals, through the Sun, Moon, Planets, and through Stars higher then the Planets” (1:14).” (Miles, 437)
7 Smart, 1980, xxx.
8 Smart, 1980, xxiv.
9 Walker, p. 449
poem might very well make light of such a fusion in order to lay bare the work’s whole elaborate system. However, for the present purposes, let us simply call it the starting point of this chapter’s investigation.

It isn’t necessarily an obvious choice to associate sorcery with theology, and thus figures such as Smart and Agrippa might seem peculiar or even bizarre to us, yet, as Shakespearian scholar Linda Woodbridge has observed, “the boundary between religion and magic has always been fluid” (32). Woodbridge’s point is perhaps best illustrated through magic’s word origins:

Magic derives from the Greek *mageia*, which in its earliest definition referred to the ceremonies and rituals performed by a magos (plural *magoi*). The *magoi*, or magi, were said to be priest-magicians from the East, from Chaldea, a Babylonian kingdom in southern Iraq, or Persia, now Iran. Indeed, *magos* ultimately derives from the Persian *makuš*. [...] Most of what we know of the magoi derives from 5th- and 4th-century BCE Greek sources that are generally hostile to their foreign brand of religion. (Davies, 2-3)

Magic then, at least in this initial circumstance, is a matter of religious interpretation. Where for the ancient Persians, magic meant a glorious and sacred tradition—what Professor Davies speculates was Zoroastrianism—for the ancient Greeks was a “hostile” and “foreign” religiosity. Much of how magic has been represented in the modern west today remains consonant with this ancient Greek interpretation despite the irony that the Hellenic world reads to us much more often like fantasy than scriptural exegesis. This unusual condition seems to follow magic wherever it goes:

When Catholicism was the widely accepted spiritual paradigm in Western Europe, the spiritual practices of the Romans were called "magic" while those sanctioned by the Church of Rome were called "religion." And again when the Protestant Reformation swept the continent, the spiritual practices of Catholics were called "magic" and "Popish sorcery" by those [...] who saw their own spiritual practices as "religion." (Cook, 9-10)

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10 Numerous scholars have approached *Jubilate Agno* as a cryptic system. Cleary, 193.
A specialist on charm’s linguistics, Leilani Cook gathers such recurrent usage implies that “the meanings of the words ‘religion’ and ‘magic’ [seem] to be founded less on any universal truth than on a possibly unacknowledged cultural bias” (17). This inclination or prejudice suggests that magic, down to its roots as a word, embodies a view that demonizes religious orientations that have gone out of favor with the prevailing spiritual attitudes of the day.11

One of the central aims of this chapter is to show how *Jubilate Agno* exploits this view, made apparent in expository moments throughout the text, such as when Smart cautions, “to conceive with intense diligence against one’s neighbor is a branch of witchcraft” (B302). While the claim doesn’t flat out condemn all practices of magic,12 it associates such practitioners with a sense of wickedness and suggests such folk are spiritually up to no good. And yet, Smart’s acknowledgment of witchcraft as something “conceive[d],” rather than practiced, suggests he also recognizes magic as a force existing more in one’s own thought than others’ actions.13 If we accept the Ancient Greeks and Persians as cultural or spiritual “neighbor[s],”14 then we can very well accept Smart’s claim as comparable to Cook’s assumptions. Witchcraft can thus be understood here not as the practice of enacting wicked rituals but of enacting wicked views.

Such nuance though tenuous is paramount to magical interpretation in *Jubilate Agno*. When Smart writes, “For the laws of King James the first against Witchcraft were wise, had it been of man to make laws,” the subject of witchcraft is yet again pointedly phrased in a cryptic manner

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11 Numerous other scholars have made similar observations (Ohrvik, 8-9).
12 The OED defines witchcraft as “a kind of magic,” as well relates it with the work of the Devil.
13 The OED defines conceive as “to form (an intention, design, etc.) in the mind or (in early use) the heart; to plan, devise, or formulate” and “To comprehend with the mind or (in early use) the heart; to understand, apprehend, realize.”
14 The OED defines neighbor as “In echoes of biblical passages [...] a fellow human”
What opens as a condemnation of witchcraft, closes as a critique of those who have condemned it. Contradictions of this kind challenge readers to think twice and decipher the text from alternate points of view. This must be at least partly due to the complicated perceptual matrix embedded in the concept of magic. By closely examining key magico-religious instances across the text, this essay considers magic in *Jubilate Agno* as an aspect of consciousness that most greatly possesses us through convoluting the profane with spiritual significance.

‘For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry’

Of the more than four thousand lines comprising *Jubilate Agno*, no passage has so possessed readers as the brief verses concerning his cat Jeoffry. Since the late 1950s, the excerpt has found its way into a significant range of popular literature anthologies and has made Jeoffry, according to Smart biographer Neil Curry, “the most famous cat in the whole history of English literature” (18). Although no references to sorcery or witchcraft appear in these seventy-three lines, Jeoffry is portrayed as a figure spilling over with religious fervor throughout them, and this is without a doubt essential to the lure of his charm. Smart introduces us to him as “the servant of the Living God” (B696) and claims “the divine spirit comes about his body to sustain it in compleat cat” (B742). While such statements ground Jeoffry in religious rather than

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15 a. Smart made numerous public statements against the act and laws of witch-hunting (Smart, 1980, 61). b. Smart was likely reacting to the King James Version of the Bible, which scholars have shown to have far more hostile translations around magic (e.g. “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”) than the original Hebrew, as well as the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate (Adu-Gyamfi, 11).

16 As stated in the introduction, anthropologist Susan Greenwood defines magic as a “universal aspect of human consciousness [...] inherent in the mind” (14).

17 In *Christopher Smart: an Annotated Bibliography*, Robert Mahony provides an extensive list of several dozen publications that have printed the excerpt.
magical terms, his feline consciousness makes our experience of his spirituality appear unconventional, esoteric, and otherworldly. This is further amplified and made difficult to interpret by the passage’s incongruous tones, which convey a playful frivolity and pious intensity at once. Because of how he causes readers to continually shift their views on the sacred between such points of irony, profanity, and sincerity, Jeoffry can be read as a magical figure, his spiritual significance more akin to a bewitching serpent than the neighborhood tabby.

From his whimsical “spraggle upon waggle” (B748) to the endearing way in which “he purrs with thankfulness” (B726), it would appear, at least initially, oxymoronic to affiliate Jeoffry with anything so sinister as the “unholy” and “blasphemous” nature associated with the concept of the profane (OED). However, the word ‘profane’ originates from the Latin ‘pro fano,’ a phrase meaning simply ‘out in front of the temple,’ as in residing outside the sacred, and were Smart not providing a magico-religious view of Jeoffry as “Cherub Cat” (B723), we would have no explicit reason to regard him as a sacred figure in Judeo-Christian terms (De Vaan, 201). Indeed, while the Bible may state that “man hath no preeminence above a beast,” the domesticated cat is completely absent from its scripture, and this is significantly almost without question no accident (KJV, Eccles. 3:19). The cat was first domesticated in ancient Egypt and “its religious popularity gradually surpassed that of any other animal” among its kingdoms (Engels, 23). They were “revered as incarnate divinities” and literally “made their homes in the great temples, slept on purple cushions in the Holy of Holies, and were adored by millions” (Engels, 173). For the Jews then alive, Egypt and its sacred cats represented a culture and spirituality that was intensely hostile because it was not only profane to their own religious customs but had for long periods persecuted and enslaved its people. Just as the Greeks and
Romans saw Persian spirituality as a form of wicked magic, so these Jews and later Christians viewed “the power of the religion of Isis and Bubastis [e.g. Egyptian deities associated with cats] as a substantial threat” (Engels, 133). Thus, in the Biblical gaze, felines were conceived as magical creatures that belonged to a profane world of “evil and demonic spirits,” and therefore would not appear anywhere throughout the Jew’s most sacred texts (Engels, 153).

Centuries later, during the late medieval and early modern periods, this demonizing view gave rise to what Professor Engels refers to as “the Great Cat Massacre,” during which “millions of cats and hundreds of thousands of their female owners were brutally tortured and slain throughout Western Europe” for questionable involvement with witchcraft (152). In 1666, only 54 years before Smart was born, more than 200,000 cats were massacred in the city of London alone, where less than a century later the poet would raise Jeoffry and write Jubilate Agno (Engels, 210). While Jeoffry’s “gravity and waggery” (B736) gambol about this passage in an almost slapstick manner of comedy, the tragedy of such history is arguably couched in the text. This is perhaps made most apparent when Smart complicates a historic moment in Jewish scripture, writing, “For the Lord commanded Moses concerning the cats at the departure of the Children of Israel from Egypt” (B729). While the line provides no elaboration here as to exactly what the Lord commanded, it communicates a great deal through simply displaying the Jewish deity as a figure who feels any “concern” at all for the profane creatures. This concern is further emphasized through being associated with God’s apparent distress at Egypt’s enslavement of his “Children of Israel.” Such interpolation causes the reader to see, or at least consider, the profane figure of Egypt’s cat as suddenly consecrated in Judeo-Christian terms, by God Almighty nonetheless. This view is brought home all the more to the reader by Smart’s claim that “the
English cats are the best in Europe” (B731). Such sentiments carry Smart’s perceptual conversion one step further, making the cat a sacred animal to his own culture.

Much of the Jeoffry passage reads as a vindication in this manner, in which Smart’s rhythmical, convoluted rhetoric first considers the view that frames Jeoffry as a demonic beast and then inverts this perspective so it appears that indeed “God tells him he’s a good cat” (B726). In one line, Smart plainly observes an aspect of the demonic in Jeoffry, writing “For he has the subtlety and hissing of a serpent,” yet he counters this immediately with the observation “which in goodness he suppresses” (B724). Yet in another verse, Smart seems to allude to Jeoffry’s potentially fallen state and dismisses this through maintaining that “tho he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer” (B764). Cryptic phrasing of this kind is notably reminiscent of Smart’s earlier commentary on witchcraft and plays an inherent part in how magic as an aspect of human consciousness is configured and woven into the readerly experience of *Jubilate Agno*. For Smart, enchantment in this way causes the sacred and profane to collide, and this entails the possibility of tricking readers into changing their spiritual views. In the case of Jeoffrey, Smart’s own leanings could not be more obvious; however, seemingly in lieu of this, he considers his cat in terms that are “hostile” or “foreign” to his own spiritual bias. Where many Jews and Christians would have seen Jeoffry’s connections to Egypt as a reason to condemn or demonize him, Smart makes a point to exemplify his animal-friend’s greatness through this profane association, writing, “he made a great figure in Egypt for his signal services. / For he killed the Ichneumon-rat, very pernicious by land” (B756 - 57). While Smart makes a certain case here to acquit Jeoffry of his demonized ancestry, he notably strains such praise through having the
words, “he made a great figure,” followed by, “he killed.” This is further convoluted by the Egyptian cat being represented here through the pronoun “he,” the same word Smart uses almost ritualistically when referring to Jeoffry (e.g. “For he is docile”; “For he can set up with gravity”; “For he can fetch and carry”; “for he can jump over a stick” (B744-747)) . Through such verbal sleights, Jeoffry magically appears to embody all cats from ancient Egypt to modern England, and we thus cannot help but see him as the manifestation of such divergent cultural forces.

While Smart uses convolutions and linguistic sleights to momentarily charm readers into contradictory and esoteric spiritual states, he prolongs and deepens this enchantment with Jeoffry’s figure by continuously associating him with a particular “aspect of human consciousness […] inherent in the mind” (14). Point-of-view often becomes of central significance to the unfolding action of the line, as when Smart writes, “I perceived God’s light about him both wax and fire” [emphasis mine] (B761). Such moments in the text underscore Jeoffry’s magico-religious powers as being more centered within the viewer than in the thing being viewed. Smart even goes so far as to say about Jeoffry, “he is good to think on, if a man would express himself neatly” (B755), grounding the cat more in clever, dexterous points of view than in the outside world beyond. Though subtle, these perspectival references occur with such frequency, they contextualize the entire passage, moving the reader down the page, from Jeoffry’s first appearance to the fragment’s end. Smart introduces us to the feline by telling us rather self-consciously, “I will consider my Cat Jeoffry” (B695), and then shortly thereafter makes another perspectival reference, writing “at the first glance of the glory of God in the East

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18 Even more ironic, the Ichneumon-rat is in fact not a rat but an Egyptian mongoose (Smart, 1980, 89).
he worships in his way” (B697). In these first lines, the reader’s attention is made to shift from Smart’s consideration, a word which means “to view or contemplate attentively,” to Jeoffry’s “first glance” (OED). The familiar human perspective turns in this way to the spiritual “glance” of an outsider, one who though markedly different still “worships in his way,” and thereby, perhaps without us even noticing, casts a glamour upon our own view of things.

In this way, the paramount magical event in *Jubilate Agno* is grounded in the act of perceiving, namely through seeing the sacred in the profane. Indeed, it would seem what has charmed so many readers of this passage is not that Jeoffry appears to be a truly magical being, gifted with otherworldly powers, but that Smart sees Jeoffry’s ordinary, profane existence as wholly sacred. The way Smart looks at Jeoffry’s natural “leaps” and “rolls” as involving the supernatural “blessing of God upon his [Jeoffry’s] prayer” (B699-700) is what enchants us. This, and the fact that Jeoffry participates in this “aspect of consciousness” too, as when Smart observes him “begi[n] to consider himself” (B701). Thus, seemingly profane acts, in which Jeoffry does no more than “looks upon his fore-paws to see if they are clean” (B703) or simply “looks up for his instructions” (B711), read as being endowed with sacred implication (e.g. cleanliness inferring spiritual purity, and looking up for guidance, God in Heaven). If anything makes Jeoffry a truly magical creature it is undoubtedly this ability to perceive himself and to see the world with a spiritual consciousness. In that “first glance,” an entire mythopoesis occurs in which viewing and being express one thing in synchronicity--in essence, that all is magico-religious. This notion is further amplified when Smart not only contextualizes Jeoffry’s private actions in such sacred terms but places his public interactions in a similar light:

For having consider’d God and himself he will consider his neighbor.
For if he meets another cat he will kiss her in kindness.  
For when he takes his prey he plays with it to give it a chance.  
For one mouse in seven escapes by his dallying       (B713-16)

A chain of consideration appears as a connective force in these lines, linking God and Jeoffry, not to mention Smart and the reader, to the feline’s shared sentient cosmos. The “cat” and “mouse,” much like the Egyptians and Jews, as well as the Greeks and Persians, are notably in this instance positioned as Jeoffry’s “neighbor.” Where earlier Smart positions witchcraft as the act of “conceiv[ing] with intense diligence against one’s neighbor” (B302), here Jeoffry is made to be seen as magical through how intensely he “considers” his neighbor. He approaches his fellow feline “in kindness” and even gives the mice he attacks the chance to escape because he is aware that they are no less possessed with spirit or sight than himself. The divided mind that distinguishes the profane from the sacred dissolves in this perceptual enchantment, and the text, in this way, moves considerate readers toward a spiritual transcendence as well.

In such magical consciousness, in which all that one sees is sacred, the demonic becomes not what is seemingly profane anymore but what one cannot see. Smart demonizes this myopia through Jeoffry by picturing him as a guardian of light and banisher of darkness:

For when his day's work is done his business more properly begins.  
For he keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary.  
For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.  
For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.  
For in his morning orisons he loves the sun and the sun loves him.       (B717-21)

Notably, while Smart represents the demonic through the Satanic figure of “the adversary” here, we see “the Devil” not in the terms of possessed witches and sorcerers but through the abstract concept of “death,” a state of being in which all visible bodily perception goes dark. Jeoffry “counteracts” these extreme “powers of darkness” through the perceptual sanctity of his own
“glaring eyes,” and thus quite literally “keeps the Lord’s watch in the night.” Just as death becomes associated with obscurity and darkness, so life becomes associated with visibility and light in this way too. Point of view and point of being become wholly one and the same.

Described as being covered in “electrical skin,” Jeoffry’s body appears as a radiating sentient life force. Some lines later, Smart writes, “the Electrical fire is the spiritual substance, which God sends from heaven to sustain the bodies both of man and beast,” implying that all which transmits a light participates in a sacred flowing current of sentience throughout the cosmos (B672). Such statements help make sense of the magical communion at work in Jubilate Agno, not only when Smart writes of how Jeoffry “loves the sun and the sun loves him,” but more broadly as well, as when Smart describes a mineral as “fixed fire” or associates “magical effects” with the luminescent expression, “Star—word—herb—gem.”


Although we can thus say the Jeoffry passage reveals to some degree the meaning of magic in Jubilate Agno, it remains difficult to corroborate this magical interpretation when the text is read more broadly as religious poetry for Christians, as critics tend to do. Williamson tells us “it was clearly intended to be a new Canticle on a grand scale,” and that its “primary purpose was to present a work of praise and glorification of God” (Smart, 1980, xxiv). She underscores this point further by pointing out that the title Jubilate Agno “combines the opening of the 100th psalm, Jubilate Deo, with the title of Christ, Agnus Dei,” implying it is a poem quite literally designed to be about rejoicing in Christ (xxv). Equally, Jeanne Murray Walker looks to St. Augustine’s meditations on the Psalms and their underlying structure in order to explain the
spiritual aims of Smart’s poem (458-459). While such interpretations reveal a tremendous amount about how Christian theology influences and shapes Jubilate Agno, they do not for our concerns resolve the issue of the profane nor the prevalence of magic appearances throughout the text. Therefore, in order to best understand how these riddling aspects inform the text as a whole, let us consider it not in the terms of psalms or scripture but as a charm.

In order to read Jubilate Agno as a charm, I first want to attempt to clarify what such a word means by taking into account some definitions put forward by Cook as well as anthropologist Jonathan Roper. Cook defines charms as “carefully crafted, formulaic utterances used to alter the charm performer’s reality by drawing upon powers perceived as supernatural” (1), and Roper, as “traditional verbal forms intended by their effect on supernature to bring about change in the world in which we live” (8). While their definitions appear similar here, their positions begin to shift when considering charm’s relationship to poetry. Cook states quite straight-forwardly, “charms are not [...] poems [...] but] rather, they are overtly magical utterances most commonly used by average people” (8). Roper, on the other hand, perceives this relationship as being much more complicated:

The inclusion of verbal charms in collections of folk-verse e.g. Northall (1892), Grigson (1971), Holloway (1987), is a recognition of their poem-like qualities. It is indeed perhaps an over-elevation of the poeticalness of charms, at the expense of their practical intent and their more-than-textual, extra-poetical reality, by which they come to be considered as just another minor genre of vernacular literature. (8-9)

Although Roper doesn’t flat out state if charms are or are not a kind of poetry, he identifies a strong enough correspondence between both genres to see the distinction as not an obvious one. Indeed, where Roper relates charms to “folk-verse” and “vernacular literature,” a tradition associated with poets, such as Dante and Chaucer, who notably chose to write in their culture’s
profane rather than sacred language, Cook sees the fact that charms are “meant to make magic” (9) and are “commonly used by average people” as reasons to set them apart from how we view and think about literature and poetry. In her view, “charms have two primary purposes: they seek to either keep out or cast out unwanted elements from the performer’s reality, or they attempt to reinforce or establish desired connections within that reality; i.e., they seek to either banish or to bind” (27). Cook bases her views here on James Frazer’s “Law of Sympathy” or “Law of Association,” as articulated in his anthropological study on magic, *The Golden Bough*:

> The Law of Association holds that things can be powerfully connected in surprising ways and that by finding and making the connection, we acquire the power. Binding charms, which seek to make or enhance the possible and sometimes surprising connections between elements in our world, proceed directly from the magical Law of Association. [...This law] also contains the idea of opposing elements being connected through their polarity. [...] This concept [...] I call the “Dynamic of Opposition” because it expresses the notion that opposites [...] share a dynamic reciprocity. Some charms, then, rely upon [this notion in order] to banish unwanted elements from the charmer’s reality. [...] Just as the magical Law of Association and its sublaw, the Dynamic of Opposition, are inextricably interwoven, binding and banishing can be interconnected in magical practice, with elements of both binding and banishing intents contained in the same charm. 

(Cook, 23-25)

While Cook’s notions on charm here (in chorus with Frazer’s claims on sympathetic magic) provide a functional structure through which to grasp how charm works for our purposes, it is only by putting such ideas in synthesis with Roper’s view of charms as “traditional verbal forms” with “a poetics” that we may begin to fully apply them to *Jubilate Agno*.

Perhaps the most direct way to understand *Jubilate Agno* as a kind of charm is through observing how the poem’s “traditional verbal forms” manipulate and rely so heavily on repetition. While “the structure of repetition underlies the majority of poetic devices, and it is possible to argue that repetition defines the poetic use of language” (Mazur), Roper notably
observes about charm, “repetition, whether of sounds, words, or syntactic units is perhaps the key characteristic of verbal charms, as it is of rituals in general” (20). In the case of *Jubilate Agno*, we thus might read such sound-patterning as either poetry or charm. However, Smart uses repetition at seemingly every level of the poem (e.g. through anaphora, alliteration, assonance, consonance, catalog, list, refrain, parallelism, synonymy, intertextual repetitions, as well as repetitions of figures, images, concepts, and themes) and often it is framed as having a magico-religious function. The most obvious and overwhelming use of repetition is the anaphoric litany of LET and FOR in lines that place the reader in a kind of perpetual entrancement of thoughts, words, and sounds, and gives the entire work a rhythmical coherence. Yet at a smaller scale, words throughout the text often seem to rhythmically cling to one another, as when Smart declares “Blessed. Blessed. Blessed!” (C122) or suddenly rhymes, “sound bound, soar more” (B585). Between these micro- and macro-repetitions, Smart uses numerical repetitions, such as when Jeoffry performs the ritual of considering himself in “ten degrees” over ten lines (e.g. For first he looks upon his fore-paws [...] ; for secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there; for thirdly [...] ) (B702-12). Such lists, similar to when he repeats the letters of the alphabet twice (e.g. “For N is new / For O is open / For P is Power” (B525-28); “For N is nay. / For O is over. / For P is peace.” (B550-52), establish a momentary sense of order and eventual completion, as though to imply its charm has been invoked and fully realized. In *Spiritus Mundi*, Northrop Frye suggests this intense manipulation of repetition is in fact the most fundamental building block of magical charms and enables the charmer to entrance those who listen to it:

[a charm] sets up a pattern of sound so complex and repetitive that the ordinary processes of response are short-circuited. Refrain, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, pun, antithesis: every repetitive device known to rhetoric is called into play. Such repetitive
formulas break down and confuse the conscious will, hypnotize and compel to certain
courses of action

Frye’s assertions here align *Jubilate Agno*’s form with its cryptic content of witchcraft and
magic, in which our cultural biases become perceptually “short-circuited,” and we are made to
re-evaluate our basic assumptions. However, while sound-patterns comprise one necessary
aspect of charms, Roper claims “the thought-world of the charmer and the charmed must also be
vital in the process,” and so let us now move on to consider this aspect of *Jubilate Agno* (9).

According to both Cook and Roper, charms are created in order to “alter the charm-
performer’s reality” or “bring about change in the world,” and therefore any reading of *Jubilate
Agno* as charm must seek to answer what Smart means to “alter” or “change” through the
magical text. If we look at the interrelations of the LET and FOR sections that comprise the
majority of the text, they are clearly framed by an intent to bring a combination of Biblical and
contemporary people into union with animals, plants, and stones. “Let Nimrod, the mighty
hunter, bind a Leopard to the altar, and consecrate his spear to the Lord,” (A9) Smart tells us.
And soon thereafter, “Let Aaron, the high priest, sanctify a Bull, and let him go free to the Lord
and Giver of Life” (A15). While Smart uses the words “consecrate” and “sanctify,” this union
between humans and nature is often portrayed through the act of a blessing or praise (e.g. “Let
Elihu bless with the Tortoise [...] / Let Hezekiah praise with the Dromedary” (A52-53)). More
than anything else, Smart implores his participants to “rejoice,” a word which means both “to
feel joy or delight” and, more notably, “to enjoy by possession” (OED). Smart shows this
double-meaning when he writes, “Let Shephatiah rejoice with the little Owl, which is the
wingged Cat. / For I am possessed of a cat, surpassing in beauty, from whom I take occasion to
bless Almighty God” (B68). It would thus seem Smart means through *Jubilate Agno* to bind the human world and the natural world together through enabling them to possess each other with spiritual significance. However, the charm effect of *Jubilate Agno* is clearly not intended to change the figures in its verses but to alter some aspect of its readers and their world. Smart implies this when he writes, “For my talent is to give an Impression upon words by punching, that when the reader casts his eye upon 'em, he takes up the image from the mould which I have made” (B404). The imperative mood, what Roper says is “the most classic type of magical formulae,” of the LET lines further underscores this interpretation, suggesting there is something crucial about these ceremonial images that Smart is commanding us to perceive (24). The purpose of *Jubilate Agno*’s charm can thus be said to involve altering readers’ perceptions of the sacred, and it therefore means to have a spiritual rather than physical effect upon the world.

We can also say at this point that the element of charm in *Jubilate Agno* means to “reinforce or establish desired connections” in the charmer’s reality, and can thus be read as a binding charm, yet we are still left to ask why Smart wants to change his readers’ spiritual views. In a Christian sense, the text’s imperative to rejoice is clearly very driven by a desire to “give the glory to the Lord, and the Lamb,” as the poem’s first line tells us (A1). The text, one might say, is thus attempting to change non-believers’ spiritual orientation so that Smart can reveal to them the light of Christ. However, Smart doesn’t seem very concerned with swaying disbelievers, and this is partly evidenced by how he frames magic and witchcraft throughout the text. Rather, he appears to be continually in the throes of astonishment as a witness of the spirit between people and nature. A continual sense of awe and discovery characterizes so many of the lines, such as when Smart writes, “Let Erastus rejoice with Melandry which is the largest Tunny. / For the
breath of our nostrils is an electrical spirit” (B265). Here, Smart is bringing Erastus, an assistant to Paul in the Christian Testament, to rejoice with “Tunny,” another word for tuna fish, for seemingly no reason other than to observe that one’s breath is a spiritual entity. It indicates something very ordinary about our lives (in this case, our breath) and portrays it in plain language as extraordinary, and in this way can be seen as another instance in which the profane is being reinterpreted as sacred. Yet as soon as Smart expresses this astonishment, he immediately follows this with concern, writing, “Let Quartus rejoice with Mena. God be gracious to the immortal soul of poor Carte, who was barbarously and cowardly murder’d […] / For an electrical spirit may be exasperated into a malignant fire” (B266). Smart is not only driving his readers in this instant to perceive all that occupies the air as sacred, but warning them that if they don’t, there could very well be dire consequences. This possibility of becoming possessed by “malignant fire” seems to be an active force in the world that Smart is attempting to banish through his charm of blessings and praise, and thus we can read the poem as interweaving elements of both binding and banishing.

This underlying fear can be found throughout Jubilate Agno and would seem to be central to Smart’s aim in altering his reader’s spiritual consciousness. While Smart remains in a state of jubilation throughout the text, the present-day world around him, as it appears in the poem, comes across as being in a malignant state, as when Smart writes, “For it will be better for England and all the world in a season, as I prophecy this day” (C61). He goes on to claim that when this new season comes, “there will be full churches and empty play-houses” (C68) and that “hospitality and temperance will revive” (C73). These virtues are apparently lost in his view and people are seemingly spending less time in the sacred world and more in the secular, profane
one. *Jubilate Agno’s* purpose as a charm can therefore be read as meaning to possess people, with a spiritually charged aspect of consciousness, who exist in an increasingly disenchanted world. Smart even tells us bluntly, “I am the Reviver of ADORATION amongst ENGLISH-MEN” (B332). He is thus not merely a celebrator of the sacred but a “reviver” of something lost; and that something is notably “adoration,” a magico-religious term meaning, “the action or an act of displaying profound reverence or respect; worship of God or a god, an idol, etc.; veneration of the host or a sacred object” (OED). We can thus read the veneration at work in *Jubilate Agno* as an unusual kind of protection charm that at once spiritually binds the reader in an enchanted consciousness, Christian or otherwise, and “keeps out” of their consciousness any possible sense of dispossession, disillusionment or disenchantment.

Contextualizing *Jubilate Agno* as a charm poem in such a way also helps clarify why it is so inherently concerned with and occupied by the secular and profane world. As Williamson observes, it makes continuous remarks on Isaac Newton and “deals with the principles of matter and motion, magnetism, the mechanical powers, hydrology, theories of light, sound, and atmospheric pressure, electricity, plant biology, the precession of the equinoxes, and the measurement of longitude” (410). Notably, Smart doesn’t demonize these scientific processes but reframes them as sacred and only demonizes those views which altogether lack “reverence” or “veneration” for any kind of spiritual life. Thus, “matter” is not inert but “the dust of the Earth, every atom of which is the life,” (B160), and “LIGHTNING” is not mechanistic but “is a glance of the glory of God” (B272). Indeed, other than the Devil, Newton is the only figure whose views Smart demonizes throughout *Jubilate Agno*. He says “Newton is ignorant” (B220), describes one of his claims involving lightning and thunder as “a Diabolical Hypothesis” (B269)
and states, “Newton's notion of colours is αλογος unphilosophical. / For the colours are spiritual” (B648-49). Yet despite these condemnations, he refuses to demonize Newton as a living being because he believes “nothing is so real as that which is spiritual" and therefore Newton possesses a spirit too (B258). Thus, he consecrates him as he would any other life force, writing “Newton, bless!” (C124) and “God be gracious to the immortal soul of Sr Isaac Newton” (D170). While such statements upon first glance might appear in utter contradiction, when considered through a magico-religious lens, they reveal a framework in which somebody who felt dispirited in the Newtonian age could perform such a charm-poem and have their consciousness altered through experiencing a sense of enchantment.

**Spell-Bound / Free-Verse**

It would hardly seem possible to separate *Jubilate Agno* from the realm of magic and mysticism today. The original manuscript, found in an old private library among other dreamlike relics, including “old stained glass from a ruined priory […] and sketches by the great masters,” must have looked like enchanted scripture to William Force Stead, the first to publish Smart’s work, nearly two centuries after he had written it (Smart, 1939, 14). He describes it as “bewildering at the first glance” and filled with passages and lines that should “appeal to those who appreciate the romantic and mystical” (13-14). It is perhaps unsurprising that Stead felt a certain attraction to *Jubilate Agno* in that he was an ordained minister.19 However, the poem’s appeal has clearly charmed many more than those with a specifically Christian conscience, as

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19 Notably, Stead baptized T.S. Eliot in the Church of England and was a close friend of the occult Protestant poet William Butler Yeats (Bradshaw, 77).
evidenced by its many non-Christian poet-celebrators today. The agnostic poet Edward Hirsch, who was raised in a Jewish household and writes of God in one poem, “I can’t give him up / Yet I can’t believe in him either” (2016, 8), writes of Smart, let him “fill you up with his glorious humor and wild jubilation, his grave and comic mysticism, his religious awe. Let him animate your spirit with his animism” (1998, 46). Equally, the atheist poet Anne Sexton applies the style of *Jubilate Agno* to her sequence of ten psalms. In them, she too experiences contradictory moments involving magic and continues Smart’s tradition of consecrating what appears profane, as when she writes, “Let Anne and Christopher rejoice with the worm who moves into the light like a doll’s penis” (400). Perhaps the most striking example is by the poet Galway Kinnell, who opens the second stanza of his poem *Jubilate* by describing a night in which a host of poets including Allen Ginsberg, James Wright, Etheridge Knight, Phillip Levine, and others gathered to praise Christopher Smart:

> And so, two hundred and fifteen years later, 
twenty-one poets gathered on a February night 
in a little church on Lower Fifth Avenue 
and one by one stood up and read or recited 
to a large and ardent audience thirty 
lines or so per poet from *Jubilate Agno* — mere flococinaucinihilipilification 
to the world outside, but to us a source of joy and truth — the lung-ether of the living loving the long dead.             (5-6)

Its magic it would seem has such adoration by these poets not for its Christian evangelism, but quite differently, for its capacity to bring the lyrical experience outside the dogmas of scripture without losing a sense of spirituality in the process. It consecrates profane poetic consciousness without dogmatizing it and therefore makes poetry down to its most basic rhythms a thing of potential enchantment. Its structure and repetitions, what after Whitman came to be known as
free-verse, although not bound to traditions of meter and rhyme, are grounded in the magico-religious poetics of charm. Indeed, *Jubilate Agno* underscores in this way how any seemingly secular experience of poetry can be and is read as deeply spiritual in nature.

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20 The OED defines free verse as “poetic writing in which the traditional rules of prosody, esp. those of metre and rhyme, are disregarded in favour of variable rhythms and line lengths.”
Chapter 2. ‘Beware! Beware!’: “Kubla Khan” and Coleridge’s Magical Poetics of Crisis

The writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge abound with moments that join the spiritual bedrock of enchantment to the experience of poetry. In some verses addressed to a reluctant poet-friend, he assures his comrade, “whilst yet thou were a babe [...] / Genius plung’d thee in that wizard fount” (1-2), and thereby “promis’d for thee” to be “rooted in the heavenly Muse [...] / and sanctified to Poesy” (Poems, “TO A FRIEND,” lines 5, 7-8). This sanctity endows the lyrical intellect of Shakespeare’s characters with “sacred charm” and allies a “poetic faith” to the psychological experience of “persons and characters supernatural” (Literaria, 299, 165, 147). He ventures so far as to stake his entire poetics upon this alliance, surmising “the poet, described in his ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity [...] by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination” (Literaria, 150). This “magical” force, according to Coleridge, operates as the “prime agent of all human perception” (Literaria, 144) and therefore not only poetry but all “reason is supernatural” in his view (Literary Remains, 37). Thus, the contemplative path, for him, whether navigated critically or creatively, was always to be found in the sacred fantasies of human consciousness.

The spiritual imagination was a vital yet dangerous place for Coleridge. While the experience of the fantastic possessed him with surges of tremendous intellectual energy as both

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21 Coleridge grounded this poetic faith, what he famously referred to as “that willing suspension of disbelief,” in “the sudden charm [of] moonlight [and] sunset [...in] “the poetry of nature,” and in the “affections [raised] by the dramatic truth of such emotions.” It was this truth, the reality of such feelings, that led him to devote his attention in Lyrical Ballads to characters who had encountered and felt such supernatural in their lives.

22 Leslie Brisman examines the complicated underpinnings of this quotation and its greater context in Coleridge’s writings in his article “Coleridge and the Supernatural.”

23 The fantastic is an immense subject in literary theory, first introduced by the Bulgarian-French literary critic Tzvetan Todorov. For further reference, refer to his work The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary
a poet and philosopher, it also often plagued him. In “Dejection: An Ode,” he writes of being long haunted by “A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear” that “Suspends [...] / My shaping spirit of Imagination” (Poems, 21, 85-6). “My genial spirits fail” he continues, and “Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind, / Reality's dark dream!” (39, 94-5). Magical encounters thus involved a degree of psychological risk for Coleridge. Each offered the allure of otherworldly wonder, as it likewise threatened to baffle, torment, or disenchant. While Coleridge’s philosophical writings strive to make sense of the forces that create such charmed states, his poetical works often dramatize the uncertainty provoked by such conditions. In “The Eolian Harp,” the poem’s speaker, upon becoming possessed by “a soft floating witchery of sound” (20), swings from revelatory thoughts of wonder to haunting thoughts of being “Wilder’d and dark” before “Th’ INCOMPREHENSIBLE!” (63, 59). Likewise, in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the title character’s sense of reality becomes dangerously unmoored from the realm of reason after a supernatural vessel crosses his path on a sea voyage. The experience causes the world before him to appear as “Alone, alone, all, all alone / [...] in agony”

24 While such broad claims must be taken with a grain of salt, this one is perhaps validated by the following passage taken from Biographia Literaria: “Descartes, speaking as a naturalist, and in imitation of Archimedes, said, ‘give me matter and motion and I will construct you the universe.’ We must of course understand him to have meant: I will render the construction of the universe intelligible. In the same sense the transcendental philosopher says: grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or find itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you. Every other science presupposes intelligence as already existing and complete: the philosopher contemplates it in its growth, and as it were represents its history to the mind from its birth to its maturity” (139-40).

25 This is perhaps most evidenced through his magic-themed play Osorio, later re-titled, Remorse.

26 See lines 44-48
(224-25); however, the paranormal event also inspires ecstatic states, as when “slimy things [...] / 
Upon the slimy sea” (121-2) no longer rouse disgust or horror for him but miraculous rapture:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware (274-77)

The experience of enchantment, so far as we may align such a phrase with Coleridge’s lyrical
“tales of ghosts, wizards, genii, and secret talismans” (Literaria, 280), we can thus say belongs to
a domain of spiritual chaos that, once encountered, leads to dramatic confrontations which tend
to play out as divine comedy or tragedy for the sojourner whose fate hangs in the balance.

In the previous chapter, I explored the possibility that the experience of enchantment
enables poetry to function as a consecrating force in a secular age; in this chapter, I will further
build upon this notion by suggesting magic embodies spiritual crisis in Coleridge’s poetry, and
thereby frames poetry as a container and conduit for religious experiences27 in a secular age.

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27 While many contributions have established the secular study on the nature of religious experience, none has likely
established a foundation so much as William James’ definitive work The Varieties of Religious Experience. The
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines religious experiences as “experiences that seem to the person having
them to be of some objective reality and to have some religious import. That reality can be an individual, a state of
affairs, a fact, or even an absence, depending on the religious tradition the experience is a part of [...]. Perhaps most
are visual or auditory presentations (visions and auditions), but not through the physical eyes or ears. Subjects report
“seeing” or “hearing,” but quickly disavow any claim to seeing or hearing with bodily sense organs. Such
experiences are easy to dismiss as hallucinations, but the subjects of the experience frequently claim that though it is
entirely internal, like a hallucination or imagination, it is nevertheless a veridical experience, through some spiritual
analog of the eye or ear (James 1902 and Alston 1991 cite many examples). In other cases, the language of “seeing”
is used in its extended sense of realization, as when a yogi is said to “see” his or her identity with Brahman;
Buddhists speak of “seeing things as they are” as one of the hallmarks of true enlightenment, where this means
grasping or realizing the emptiness of things, but not in a purely intellectual way. Another type is the religious
experience that comes through sensory experiences of ordinary objects, but seems to carry with it extra information
about some supramundane reality. Examples include experiencing God in nature, in the starry sky, or a flower, or
the like. A second person standing nearby would see exactly the same sky or flower, but would not necessarily have
the further religious content to his or her experience. There are also cases in which the religious experience just is an
ordinary perception, but the physical object is itself the object of religious significance. Moses’s experience of the
burning bush, or the Buddha’s disciples watching him levitate, are examples of this type. A second person standing
nearby would see exactly the same phenomenon. Witnesses to miracles are having that kind of religious experience,
Notably, poetry is unique across the liberal arts in this respect—in that through its complex riddling of language, it can provide readers with a way to grasp meaning in one hand while steadily holding the ineffable in another. The poet thus plays a kind of psychopomp, guiding home lost souls, be they a tranquil speaker enchanted by a harp or a haunted sailor seeking redemption, through the ritual performance of poetry. In the case of the mariner, Coleridge goes so far as to endow him with “strange power of speech” (587) and it is only through this ritual of lyrical force that the sailor then becomes capable of unburdening the “woful agony” of his “ghastly tale” (579, 584). The poet’s dramatic epiphanies in this manner mirror that of the shaman’s ecstasy, whose verbal charm techniques involve “special relations with ‘spirits’” and “magical flight” (Eliade, 6) and whose work “not only directs the community’s religious life but, as it were, guards its ‘soul’” (8). According to religious historian Mircea Eliade, “the shaman is the great specialist in the human soul [...] and wherever the immediate fate of the soul is not at issue, [...] the shaman is not indispensable” (8). While it would be fallacious to represent Coleridge as a bona fide shaman, comparable to the Yakut practitioners of northeastern Siberia,28 the comparison is not altogether without merit. Hundreds of references to blessings, curses, spells, and charms appear in his poetry, often through direct invocation. “Hear, sweet Spirit, hear the spell, / Lest a blacker charm compel!” summons the troubled sorcerer, Albert, in his

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28 Eliade traces shamanism back to this territory as well to Central Asia: “Shamanism in the strict sense is pre-eminent a religious phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia. The word comes to us, through the Russian, from the Tungusic Saman. In the other languages of Central and North Asia the corresponding terms are: Yakut ojuna (oyuna), Mongolian biigd, bêgad (buge, bi), and udagan (cf. also Buryat udayan, Yakut udoyan: ‘shamaness”), Turko- Tatar kam (Altaic kam, gam, Mongolian kami, etc.) [...] Throughout the immense area comprising Central and North Asia, the magico-religious life of society centers on the shaman” [Emphasis added] (4).
play *Remorse* (3.1.69-70). More poignant, perhaps, is the resemblance in their magical journeys. While the shaman traverses the chaos of spirit possession and Otherworld depths in order to safeguard against any “loss of the soul” (Eliade, 8), the poet of Coleridge’s poetry navigates an unstable labyrinth of daemonic fantasies in order to minister over his own vast interiors. A poem is both the lyrical arc of such an event and the record of such an episode; each depends upon fantasy because each must confront the unknown forces that undergird his believed reality.²⁹

Of course, certain boundaries between these figures must also be recognized. Where the shaman’s flight is framed and supported by his shared religious experience of life, the poet’s journey transgresses the secular domain of his existence. And unlike “shamans [who] are of the ‘elect’” (7), no absolute spiritual governance³⁰ regulates the Coleridgean poet’s transmigrations. His poetical voyages it would seem come at his own volition and rely more upon him than any religious cooperative for meaning.³¹ Each poem was a solitary magical experiment without any endorsement from the company of science or doctrine, and thus it is unsurprising that his oeuvre includes enigmatic fragments and psychical breakdowns.³²

Yet despite this spiritual independence, the vocation of a poet was far from a solitary affair for Coleridge. He was just as likely to recite his work among fellow poets and appreciators

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²⁹ It is little wonder Freud affirms “Not I, but the poets discovered the unconscious” (J. Berman, 304).
³⁰ Notably, Coleridge wrote several works on Christian theology (*Lay Sermons* and *Aids to Reflection*), and, during the 1790s, he even worked a few years as an Anglican minister, however, his spiritual exploration as evidenced through his poetry is clearly not bound to such religious orthodoxy (*Coleridge, Poetry and Prose*).
³¹ Indeed, in *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*, J.L. Lowes devotes an entire book to the unusual routes of Coleridge’s unique poetical imagination.
³² Coleridge’s collected poetical writings contain nearly a hundred various fragments.
as he was to engage a thoughtful crowd in a rousing conversation on scripture or poetry. While his collaborative spirit as a poet is perhaps most famously attributed to his co-authoring of *Lyrical Ballads* with William Wordsworth, the experience of fellowship proves vital to many of the questers throughout his poetry. Just as the mariner’s solitary accounts acquire significance only by their being shared, so the speaker of “The Eolian Harp” discovers spiritual solace, not in “flitting phantasies” (40), but through his “beloved”\(^\text{34}\) (50). Although Coleridge’s supernatural poems do not belong to any religious group, this communion is perhaps indicative of a wish or need for spiritual community. Secularism summoned a society of spiritual refugees, and poetry gave momentary asylum. Coleridge’s magical encounters reckoned with his own private episodes of spiritual chaos, and thus his poetry, once made accessible to the public, afforded others with a way to hold and process spiritual crises that many arguably lacked an otherwise more satisfactory means to contain. While I have thus far focused my attentions upon “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “The Eolian Harp” in order to demonstrate this, no magical flight in Coleridge’s oeuvre has so embodied the secular experience of spiritual crisis as “Kubla Khan: Or, a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment”; and this, as I’ll show, holds true whether one regards the formal workings of its poetry or the extraordinary reactions of its readers. The

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\(^{33}\) In *Coleridge’s Poetic Intelligence*, John Beer supports this, writing “[Coleridge’s] ability to conjure ideas into vivid existence was something which many of his friends delighted in -- even if they were sometimes taken aback to discover that one or two of the feats of knowledge were performed with the aid of a hidden device behind the conjuror’s back […] Other friends were disturbed, puzzled, or simply amused by these discoveries; none, however, found their belief in his powers compromised. De Quincey himself was explicit on the paradox involved: “He spun daily, and at all hours . . . from the loom of his own magical brain, theories more gorgeous by far . . . With the riches of El Dorado lying about him he would condescend to filch a handful of gold from any man whose purse he fancied” (5).

\(^{34}\) lines 49-64
duration of this chapter will therefore devote its pages to a consideration of “Kubla Khan” as a cultural container of enchantment, followed by a close reading of the poem’s magical operations.

**Nonsense, Mysticism, and the Holy Mess of “Kubla Khan”**

Over the past two centuries, critics have identified a bewildering range of intellectual traditions within the lines of “Kubla Khan.” While scholars have found the sacred fantasies of bygone ages in the “Paradise”35 (54) of the poem’s last line, Coleridge also kindled many future scholars’ works when he proposed at the opening of the fragment that it be read “rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the grounds of any supposed poetic merits”36 (Poems, 228). Such a presupposition prompted certain readers to consider what on the whole distinguished the former from the later, and, in addition, raised the perhaps more audacious question of what at rock bottom constitutes poetry?37 Many critics have thus defied its author’s prefatory instructions and have used the poem to exemplify their own poetics. For some, “Kubla Khan” wholly dramatized the transcendent dream and inevitable plight of a poet’s work, and thereby encapsulated all that poetry could hope to embody for its readers. For others, despite that its lines held a certain force, its fragmentation in form and content failed to signal any aggregate

35 For example, Rosemary Ashton relates this paradise to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (114-15); and Richard Holmes, to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Ion* (Early, 164).
36 While William Whewell wouldn’t coin the word ‘scientist’ until the year of Coleridge’s death (Snyder), it is notable that this critical quotation not only took its course through poetry but psychology too. Coleridge held a fascination with dreams, as documented by scholars such as Jennifer Ford, David S. Miall, and Don Kuiken, and, thus, in some manner, he stands as a kind of predecessor to both Freudian and Jungian dream interpretation.
37 Thus Owen Barfield attempts to establish a vague starting point in his penetrating work *Poetic Diction*: “If the question, what is poetry? has never been answered, everyone will agree at least thus far: that it is not merely so many waves in the air or ink-marks on a piece of paper--that it exists primarily in the world of consciousness. Language itself, we feel, only springs into being as it is uttered by men, or heard by men, or thought by men. Whatever poetry may be, then, it is something more than the signs or sounds by which it is conveyed (41).
meaning, and thereby failed to contain any poetic sense. In this dialectical impasse, “Kubla Khan” thus became a discursive battlefield upon which the ages clashed over many possible truths. As Richard Gerber writes, “likely […] no poem in the English language has provided more pages of comment per line than ‘Kubla Khan’” (322). However, for all these deliberations, most, if not all, scholars have recognized the poem’s magical allure. Indeed, it is the overwhelming experience of such enchantment that has assured this long-standing feud its cultural continuum and underscores the poem’s tremendous capacity to inspire spiritual crisis.

While readers of Coleridge’s poetry primarily encounter the supernatural by secondary accounts, much like the wedding guest who can only wonder at the mariner’s tale, charm embodies more direct expression in “Kubla Khan”; here, magic happens closer to where language assembles into thoughts, and, therefore, enchantment can be said to transpire more through the reader than any figure in the text. Such immersive rhetoric has been precarious for the critic entrusted to make sense of all this. Even for a scholar such as John Livingston Lowes, who took tremendous pains to analyze “Kubla Khan” through the prism of all the known literature Coleridge had read up to the poem’s creation, the lines never cease to paralyze his judgment and often bring him to retire his analysis and surrender to the work’s magical flight: “‘Kubla Khan’ is as near enchantment, I suppose, as we are like to come in this dull world,” he remarks in one passage; and soon after, as though captive in a deep state of revelation, “the poem

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38 One may note here that one primary definition of the word ‘critical’ is “of the nature of, or constituting, a crisis”; and one primary definition of the word ‘crisis’ is to be at “a critical point […] a vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent” (OED). The nature of the critic, we can thus say, is, to some degree, inherently involved with matters of crisis, and all the more so when the subject is “Kubla Khan.”

39 I recognize this is somewhat opaque language and will elaborate upon this point later in the chapter and attempt to further clarify it through the direct exposition of a close reading of the poem.
is steeped in the wonder of all Coleridge’s enchanted voyagings” (409-10). While Lowes’ enthusiasms arrive more than a century after “Kubla Khan” was published, we can see a similar account of such affect in a letter from Charles Lamb to Wordsworth:

Coleridge is printing 'Christabel,' by Lord Byron's recommendation to Murray, with what he calls a vision, 'Kubla Khan,' which said vision he repeats so enchantingly that it irradiates & brings Heaven & Elysian bowers into my parlour while he sings or says it; but there is an observation: 'never tell thy dreams,' and I am almost afraid that 'Kubla Khan' is an owl that won't bear daylight. I fear lest it should be discovered by the lantern of typography and clear reducting no better than nonsense or no sense.

(Holmes, Darker, 429)

Although Lamb disparages where Lowes delights, we can see, perhaps more importantly, that his reaction is no less dizzied by the poem’s unusual charm. Through reading its lines, they both become contained or possessed by a heightened spiritual state: where the poem “brings Heaven & Elysian bowers into my parlour” for Lamb, it redeems “the dull world” for Lowes. While all this may appear little more than pleasurable upon first glance, the fog of reason that accompanies such enchantment also makes plain that such paradise contains troubles of discernment as well.

This confusion is almost certainly due to how conflicting the experience of sense is in relation to the experience of the supernatural; in order for fantasy to prosper, the rational expectations one assigns to reality must be defied. Moreover, such discord was further exacerbated by the fact that it was not being focused upon the soul of a fictional mariner but rather was being thrust right into the experience of the critic. The criticism of twentieth and

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40 By sense, I mean “the ability to make sound judgements and sensible decisions regarding such matters”; “the thinking or reasoning faculty of the human mind in a normal or undisturbed state”; “reason, sanity, wits”; “an ability to judge or assess what is real, appropriate, or possible, esp. as opposed to what is only imagined or desired”; “an impression or awareness of what is real or true” (OED).

41 While Coleridge informs us that the poem is from his own point-of-view while in a dreaming state, the reader, in this instance a critic, must to some degree take on the lyrical position of the speaker.
twenty-first century scholars such as Herbert Tucker and the late John Beer is thus carefully positioned around “Kubla Khan,” each assertion, an ongoing choreography between argumentation and allure. Like anthropologists in the midst of a ceremony, they engage the text as both participant and observer, maintaining their enchantment while also striving to extract its meanings. Indeed, this was likely just what Beer meant when he wrote, “the reception of the poem will vary according to the degree of submission to its more ‘enchanting’ aspects”42 (Languages, 220). All of this corresponds quite well with Lamb’s reception of the poem as “no better than nonsense or no sense.” So affected by its fantastical qualities, Lamb’s incapacity to find anything sensible in Coleridge’s words authenticates the poem’s magical charge. And Lamb’s reception was notably far from unique. Upon its publication, William Hazlitt in a review for the Examiner argued the poem “does little or nothing” but to show “Mr. Coleridge can write better nonsense verse43 than any man in English” (Holmes, Darker, 430); likewise, T.S. Eliot, in a lecture delivered at Harvard, claimed the fragment “sank to the depths of Coleridge’s feeling, was saturated, transformed there […] and brought up into daylight again. But it is not used: the poem has not been written” (146). While what Eliot meant exactly by “used”44 remains open to conjecture, he makes clear his view that the fragment’s “organization” and “context,” or lack thereof, are what impair “the poem [from doing] its work” (151). Elsewhere, Eliot suggests “the more seasoned reader [of poetry…] does not bother about understanding; not, at least, at first.”

42 The passage continues, “One can allow one’s mind to be taken over by its rhythm, while contemplating the shifting landscapes described and suggested as one might in a dream. As soon as the conscious mind takes over, on the other hand, questions will begin to pose themselves” (220).
43 Notably, Hazlitt was framing this view of nonsense poetry several decades before Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear possessed popular world culture with their “nonsense” verses.
44 This word has particular charge and discursive application within its own context in that it comes from Eliot’s published lecture series, ‘The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism’ [emphasis added].
and he counts himself one among such a number: “some of the poetry to which I am most devoted is poetry which I did not understand at first reading; some is poetry which I am not sure I understand yet: for instance, Shakespeare’s” (151). However, in the case of “Kubla Khan,” the issue of meaning seems to goad him with particular doggedness, as if the fragment sets him up to think that it ought to mean, though it doesn’t. The closer a poem approaches the perimeters of sense, the more the sensitive reader will feel compelled to make meaning, and someone of such intellectual sensitivity as Eliot, as well Lamb and Hazlitt, would undoubtedly have felt such an urge toward “Kubla Khan.” None of what I’ve just put forward therefore has been done in order to contradict or counteract their judgments; rather, it has been to show that many strong readers have felt “Kubla Khan” summon their intellect to pursue its meaning, and, in one manner or another, have in turn been roundly thwarted, and it is the accumulation of this affective experience that here may give meaning to nonsense, and sense to the supernatural.

A great deal can be apprehended about the incomprehensible if one allows the passage of understanding and its regression\(^4\) to express less an abstract theme for academic scrutiny than a

\(^{4}\) Teresa Brennan writes convincingly about the complicated nature of this affective intelligence. “The transmission of affect,” as she calls it, and after which she titles her book on the subject, “whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The “atmosphere” or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before, but it did not originate sui generis: it was not generated solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes” (1).

[…] “Knowledge of this bodily motion […] is no longer gleaned by the path of bodily sensation but by that of visual and auditory observation. The predilection for the readily discernible physiological change is accompanied by reducing complex human motivation to the drives of hunger, love-sex, aggression, fear, and self-preservation. Bodily changes in fear, hunger, pain, rage, and affectionate or sexual arousal become the basic categories of endogenous drives, while drives in turn are identified as the source of the affects. The problem, as will be evident, is less in the emphasis on the bodily changes than in the reductionism in understanding them. These bodily changes are not viewed as “intelligent” or as intentional unconscious processes capable of being reconnected with conscious ones (although I believe they should be)” (4).
felt presence by those who have experienced “Kubla Khan.” While such notions might be too close for comfort, confronting one not with the disembodied thought but immediate feeling of one’s own incomprehensible nature,\(^46\) there is nothing senseless to the idea that those who cannot comprehend an event by sheer intellect must then do so largely through feeling.\(^47\) Thus, what might be phrased as nonsense in one reading, may get called sensation\(^48\) in another. For Tucker, this felt “resistance that a verbal charm poses to comprehension” represents a central

\(^{46}\) Such incomprehensible affective states are perhaps best encapsulated by Soren Kierkegaard’s comparison of anxiety to dizziness: “Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness. Further than this, psychology cannot and will not go. In that very moment everything is changed, and freedom, when it again rises, sees that it is guilty. Between these two moments lies the leap, which no science has explained and which no science can explain. He who becomes guilty in anxiety becomes as ambiguously guilty as it is possible to become” (61). Yet another compelling interpretation of this incomprehensibility in relation to the supernatural is Nietzsche’s axiomatic warning to the confronter of monsters: “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you” (89).

\(^{47}\) The view that our bodies house their own sensory intelligence is hardly debatable today. Neuroscientist Diego Bohórquez published research in 2010 revealing a particular type of cell in the lining of the gut with “footlike protrusions that resemble the synapses neurons use to communicate with each other” (Underwood). The discovery led to uncovering the activity of some one hundred million neurons in the pit of the stomach, “more than in either the spinal cord or the peripheral nervous system” (Hadhazy). According to Michael Gershon, author of *The Second Brain* and Chair of the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at Columbia University, this mass of neural tissue “partly determines our mental state” and accounts for many of our gut feelings such as the sensation of butterflies in the stomach. Emeran Mayer, professor of physiology, psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA, echoes Gershon, saying “A big part of our emotions are probably influenced by the nerves in our gut” (Hadhazy). Mayer’s prediction is largely based on another discovery that the gut is responsible for about ninety percent of the information communicated between the lower and upper brain, which it sends through the vagus nerve that directly joins the pit of the stomach to the brain stem. These revelations would not have surprised poet A.E. Housman. He seemed to already intuit such psychical transmissions at work in his body from his experience as a poet, as when he writes, “if I were obliged, not to define poetry, but to name the class of things to which it belongs, I should call it a secretion; whether a natural secretion, like turpentine in the fir, or a morbid secretion, like the pearl in the oyster” (48, Housman). Yet Gershon draws a line here, claiming “the second brain doesn't help with the great thought processes… religion, philosophy and poetry is left to the brain in the head.” And though he might mean to be implying here that the lower brain is more involved with emotions than ideas, his assertion fails to recognize the complex and highly involved role of intelligible feeling in the production of poetry and other so-called “great thought.”

\(^{48}\) Notably, the *Oxford English Dictionary* applies the definition “A physical feeling; spec. a mental state resulting from a stimulus operating on any of the senses or from a condition of part of the body” for both its entries on “sensation” and “sense.”
component of what he refers to as magic’s “irreference” (110). Tucker defines irreference as “the currency of those aspects of language that abstain from denoting the world, in order that they may wield it instead; words that aim not to refer but to take charge, not to signify but to act [...] irreference compels reality rather than reporting on it (103).49 In his critique of “Kubla Khan,” Tucker calls attention to the “melodious irreference” of words such as “Mount Abora” and that “nonsense nugget “Xanadu,”” place-names which are “perfectly charming in that nobody knows for certain what [each] denotes,” and he further speculates that Coleridge may very well be working with such currency not merely in these proper nouns but throughout the entire poem (117-18). Tucker’s theory holds particular significance in this regard because it shows how “Kubla Khan” operates more as a container and conduit for felt experiences than ideas. The way the poem happens to a reader is the poem’s felt, incarnate meaning. Its imaginative energies compel reality no less than birdsong or starlight for the one in its presence. While perhaps revelatory in its initial impact, such anagogic findings, in which words appear to contain more than their mere meaning, obscure the line that tells apart magic incantation from poetry, and, consequently, put the secular-minded literature scholar, yet again, on rather questionable footing.

49 While Tucker’s term perhaps stands as unique in the domain of secular interpretation, he is certainly not the first scholar to explore and conceptualize such ideas. In Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage, anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada frames “witchcraft” in much the same manner that Tucker frames “irreference.” She writes “witchcraft is spoken words; but these spoken words are power, and not knowledge or information. To talk, in witchcraft, is never to inform. Or if information is given, it is so that the person who is to kill [...] will know where to aim his blows. ‘Informing’ an ethnographer, that is, someone who claims to have no intention of using the information, but naively wants to know for the sake of knowing, is literally unthinkable. For a single word (and only a word) can tie or untie a fate, and whoever puts himself in a position to utter it is formidable” (9-10). While Favret-Saada’s arguments are unique, her claims are built on prior anthropological investigations into the nature of magical language, such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s landmark work 1937 Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande, as well Bronislaw Malinowski’s 1935 Coral Gardens and their Magic, Volume II: The Language of Magic and Gardening.
The idea that poetry can be tantamount to a magical rite crosses a threshold from literary theory into ministerial praxis, and thus a majority of modern critics have tended to acknowledge their resemblance in a largely peripheral manner. Even in the scholarship of eminent poet-critics who follow in Coleridge’s footsteps, such as William Butler Yeats and Annie Finch, charm is presented as more analogous than equivalent to poetry. While Finch may therefore refer to one volume of her poems as an actual grimoire of spells, her criticism positions “the age-old association of poetry with religious ritual and magical incantation” in comparative expressions (43). She tells us the poet “H.D. chants Greek names as if they were a spell” (41) and writes that “poetic repetition” is “like the drumbeat of a shaman” [emphasis added] (46). Yeats confesses that in writing criticism on magic “I have become uneasy [...] because some incident or some symbol [...] seemed, I know not why, to belong to hidden things” (46). While he sees the symbolic charge involved in “the evocation of spirits” (29) as things “used consciously by the masters of magic,” he recognizes such art has been expressed no better than “half unconsciously by [...] the poet, the musician, and the artist” (64). Among scholars, Harold Bloom, critiquing Percy Shelley’s vision in “Mont Blanc” of “the witch Poesy,” suggested a witch was a fitting

50 Notably, the longstanding bastion Poetry writes “Samuel Taylor Coleridge is the premier poet-critic of modern English tradition, distinguished for the scope and influence of his thinking about literature as much as for his innovative verse” (Poetry Foundation).
51 Yeats was one of his century’s most significant poets, and he took great interest in magic and poetry, as evidenced through his membership in The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (Raine), as well, and, namely, in his critical writings on magic (“Magic,” “William Blake and the Imagination,” “The Celtic Element in Literature,” etc.).
52 Finch is an internationally acclaimed poet and is a self-proclaimed “poetry-witch”; according to her website (anniefinch.com), she is also “the Founding Director of Poetry Witch Community, where she teaches poetry, meter, scansion, and The Magic of Rhythmically Writing” (Annie Finch). Revered at least as much for her critical work, such as her landmark text The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse, her criticism has led her to lecture at UC Berkeley, Oxford University, and Harvard.
53 I say this in no manner to downplay Yeats’ and Finch’s beliefs regarding magic and poetry. Indeed, they have contributed a vast and venerable sum toward keeping this public discourse alive.
54 Spells: New and Selected Poems
comparison to poetry not because the one stood for the other but because poetry resembles magic in that each “competes with religion and philosophy as a discipline apprehending reality” (174). And Shelley, in his *Defense of Poetry*, looks back to “Petrarch, whose verses are as spells which unseal the inmost enchanted fountains” [emphasis added], and, therefore, echo a magic that remains inaccessible and beyond poetry (435).

Thomas Greene perhaps comes closest to a coterminus line of reasoning in his posthumously published essay collection *Poetry, Signs, and Magic*. Greene’s argument asserts that magical invocation “is central to the poetic text” and “may be the more rewarding key to the force of poetry” (43). The magic of invocation, Greene claims, relies upon a “fundamental, universal need to appropriate reality” (47), and “both spell and poem take their origin in the experience of lack and in a wish that stems from it” (49). He alleges, “if the magical spell can be said always to aim at appropriation, a poem seems to make possible a finer interiorization,” focused more upon the transformative aspects of language (e.g. tone, attitude, metaphor, drama, meaning) and linguistic consciousness than upon actual referent things (53). Thus, he too concedes “poetic invocations pretend to behave as though the speaker had magical power” [emphasis added] (44). Anya Taylor, who has been greatly helpful in charting magical thought in eighteenth and early nineteenth century poetry, and offers extensive analysis on Coleridge’s magical theories, phrases this divergence in exacting prose:

There are limits to the kinship imagined by poets to exist between magic and poetry [...] Even after seeing the essentially magical quality of analogies, parallel plots, metaphors that exchange corresponding aspects, symbols that serve as prognostications, and images that capture the essential nature of the thing, we can certainly object to any broad application of magical theory to poetry. Most notably poetry differs from magical verse because each poem is a unique occurrence. It does not recur. It is not rigidly formulaic;
it arises out of a specific individual personality (even though artfully designed) rather than being a traditional construct aiming to work automatically on the universe. 

In an arena that so often leaves one wanting more and opens one to such great doubt, Taylor’s conviction brings with it a certain satisfaction. Each sentence carries with unyielding confidence into the next, assigning magic a location, placing poetry elsewhere, and marking between them discernable borders and crossings. Her claim, that “we can certainly object to any broad application of magical theory to poetry,” states outright what many of these writers seem to have in mind. Yet, this territory, for most, a place between judgment and inspiration, rouses hesitation and nervousness regarding absolutes because neither poetry nor magic appear to be governed by immutable laws; one refuses the paraphrastic mind while the other does away with coherence altogether, as Lamb, Hazlitt, Beer, and Tucker each respectively demonstrated earlier. In the cognitive whirlwind between the here and hereafter, “Kubla Khan” has dizzied seas of scholars into secular schools of whirling dervishes, time, and time, and time again; and this alone would seem to counter, at least experientially, this “rigidly formulaic” interpretation of magic.

A great deal might very well be put to rest regarding “Kubla Khan” and poetical enchantment if one were to embrace the notion that magic has involved nothing more than human consciousness all along. While readers have found religious works to be pliable material for a variety of sacred, secular, and sacro-secular interpretations, such diversity of thought strangely tends to petrify when it comes to magical literature, as though all charm can only be understood as a fundamentalist belief in the human capacity to defy the so-called laws of
nature. In *The Anthropology of Magic*, Susan Greenwood writes “magic is misunderstood and trivialized by the belief that only the naive take it seriously, or that it is only the practice of charlatans or evil-doers” (136), and, consequently, “magic is arguably the least understood subject in anthropology today” (172). Greenwood, who uniquely qualifies as “a practitioner of magic as well as an anthropologist” with extensive ethnographic experience (1), roundly rejects such inclinations, stating, as I’ve previously observed, that “magic is a universal aspect of human consciousness; it is inherent in the mind” (14). She finds its intelligence in the drama of metaphor and myth and gives evidence that such a “mentality [...] enables poetry” (24). While this sense of magic accords well with interpretations such as those of Greene’s and Tucker’s, Greenwood’s uniquely dares to bring scholars deeper into the trenches of this visionary consciousness, as, comparatively, theirs may acknowledge magic but only from the vantage of a critically safe psychic distance.

The one who follows a cognitive interpretation of magic, in which consciousness is positioned more as a sensory experience than as an experience of sense, is bound to broach mystical shores. When Eliot reflected upon his experiences with “Kubla Khan,” this is just

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55 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s entry on “Laws of Nature”: “Science includes many principles at least once thought to be laws of nature: Newton’s law of gravitation, his three laws of motion, the ideal gas laws, Mendel’s laws, the laws of supply and demand, and so on” [...] (Carroll).
56 In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner defines “psychic distance” as the “distance that the reader feels between himself and the events of the story” (111).
57 Although there is no objective line to distinguish the nature of magic from mysticism, various authors have attempted to demonstrate across a range of texts how these two modes differ, while existing at the same time on a shared spectrum. Perhaps the most famous modern interpretation of this spectrum is poet and Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill’s 1911 *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*. In it, she tells us “the spiritual history of man reveals two distinct and fundamental attitudes towards the unseen; and two methods whereby he has sought to get in touch with it [...] the “way of magic” and the “way of mysticism.” [...] Although in their extreme forms these methods are sharply contrasted, their frontiers are far from being clearly defined [...] Hence, much which is really magic is loosely and popularly described as mysticism [...] “The
what he discovered. He insists “faith in mystical inspiration is responsible for the exaggerated repute of ‘Kubla Khan’” (146). Where most scholars, as I have shown, struggle to believe poetry capable of magic because they distrust aspects of magic, Eliot interestingly struggles to believe poetry is capable of magic, not because he distrusts it, but because he believes mystical expression doesn’t tolerate poetry. While he acknowledges “a relation [...] between mysticism and some kinds of poetry, or some of the kinds of states in which poetry is produced” (139), he limits such experiences to fleeting episodes that language hardly, if at all, can possess:

[that] which results in an incantation [...] is a very different thing from mystical illumination. The latter is a vision which may be accompanied by the realisation that you will never be able to communicate it to anyone else, or even by the realisation that when it is past you will not be able to recall it to yourself; the former is not a vision but a motion terminating in an arrangement of words on paper. (145)

fundamental difference between the two is this: magic wants to get, mysticism wants to give [...] “In mysticism the will is united with the emotions in an impassioned desire to transcend the sense-world [through a] “transcendental” sense. This is the poetic and religious temperament acting upon the plane of reality [...] “In magic, the will unites with the intellect in an impassioned desire for super-sensible knowledge” (70-71). While Underhill often framed magic as bad, Arthur Vesluvius, a professor of religious studies and author of more than twenty books on magic and mysticism, suggests such divisive views are problematic because “many magicians seem rather mystical in inclination; and conversely, some mystics seem rather close to magic in what they espouse or claim” (2). Vesluvius therefore suggests we ought to “refer to ‘mystico-magical’ or “magico-mystical currents” when discussing most anything along the spectrum of “Western Esotericism” (4). Regardless of who one supports, the general consensus appears to be that magic tends to emphasize a person’s relationship with “cosmological mysteries,” whereas mysticism tends to emphasize “inner or spiritual illumination,” and, therefore, as a word, it is more often used to describe the type of consciousness a person experiences while in any magical or transcendent state (3).

58 I’ve raised Eliot’s criticism twice now, and I am therefore compelled to explain my interest in his views on such matters. Eliot was a giant of twentieth century English poetry and criticism, much like Coleridge in the century prior. His reputation grew to such proportions that he once held a reading at a sports arena in Minnesota while some fifteen thousand beheld his words from the bleachers (Pritchard). For better or worse, his iconic status in this respect would appear to be embedded in our cultural consciousness, and, thus, his views on “Kubla Khan” are paramount to the current analysis that this chapter considers. Notably, in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, the final sentences of the work conclude, “If, as James Thomson observed, ‘lips only sing when they cannot kiss,’ it may also be that poets only talk when they cannot sing. I am content to leave my theorizing of poetry at this point. The sad ghost of Coleridge beckons to me from the shadows” (156).
Mysticism is thus for Eliot a matter of pure consciousness, and incantations, those charms which possess minds through words, comprise another matter, as does poetry too.\(^5\) This is why Coleridge’s self-ascribed “Vision in a Dream” does contain the enthrallment of charm for Eliot, and perhaps “mystical inspiration” to some degree as well, but not in a manner that conveys poetry. Eliot notably contextualizes his sense of poetry’s relationship to mysticism through the views of two French modernist Catholic philosophers, Henri Brémond and Jacques Maritain,\(^6\) both of whom provide a great many interesting statements about poetry and its correspondence with enchantment; however, their thoughts are cast in a starkly Catholic light, and therefore rely

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\(^5\) In an interview with \textit{Tupelo Quarterly}, poet Janaka Stucky, who identifies as a mystic and occult practitioner, and has interestingly garnered the appreciation of rock stars, from Led Zeppelin’s Jimmy Page to the White Stripes’ Jack White, offers an alternative view of mysticism’s relationship to poetry that accords well with the notion that poetry is a container and conduit for religious experiences:

“Allow me to unpack the word “occult” for a moment, because I think it’s worth expanding and clarifying that term in relation not just to my work but to a certain tradition of occult poetics as a whole—to which a number of canonical poets belong, such as: HD, Sylvia Plath, James Merrill. The Occult, writ large, refers simply to hidden knowledge—and like any scarce resource, developing access to it can be either revolutionary or can reinforce hierarchies. At its most radical, illuminating and celebrating the occult is a transgressive act which challenges the power of institutions, degrades the psychic oppression of entrenched systems, and provides individuals with direct and unmediated access to an experiential way of being in the immediate now.

“It is in a sense psychedelic, mystical, and liberating all at once. On the other hand, the promise of that eventual experience through occult knowledge can instead be used as a shackle—which is what we often see in the formation of cults with their patriarchal figureheads, “mystery schools,” certain forms of organized religions, many higher educational programs and their degree programs, and other rigidly hierarchical institutions. I am of course interested in the former, more radical approach to the occult. My relationship with it involves exploring access to the occult in the form of ecstatic poetry where \textit{the poem becomes the vessel for mystical experience}—leading beyond semantic values and inducing a suspension of consciousness, which in turn offers an immediate induction for the audience into the same transformational conditions that created it. In other words, I am interested in putting myself into a mystical state, writing from that state, and bringing the audience back into that state through my writing. Though I do incorporate elements of ritual, ceremonial magick, and chaos magick into my creative practice, in my poetry itself radical access to the occult isn’t accomplished by writing “about” the occult itself, which would be a narrative treating the memory of the act. To paraphrase Alan Watts: memory is the corpse of experience. Instead of memory and narrative, I see the poetry of ecstasis as a poetry of the moment—not a signifying poetry but of the experience itself, as it unravels and doubles back on itself” [emphasis added] (Darling).

\(^6\) See Bremond’s \textit{Prayer and Poetry} and Maritain’s \textit{Situation of Poetry: Four Essays on the Relations Between Poetry, Mysticism, Magic and Knowledge}. 
upon dogmas which do not address the affective experiences of the secular reader. There is yet another modernist French philosopher, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose theories on mystical experience Eliot wrote about as a student at Harvard, and later publicly endorsed (Spurr, 270-71). Why Lévy-Bruhl receives no mention in Eliot’s *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* perhaps deserves further attention, especially since David Spurr has convincingly shown the great influence that Lévy-Bruhl likely had upon Eliot’s poetic process and work. Like Greenwood in the century after him, Lévy-Bruhl turns to anthropology rather than theology in order to grasp such mystical states, and this spiritual conflict-of-interest may very well have influenced Eliot’s hesitation, alongside many others, to consider his work. Although his name has become a somewhat obscure reference in the annals of philosophy, art, and science, Lévy-Bruhl’s theory of magical consciousness more thoroughly reveals and well-contains the magico-religious critical situation roused by “Kubla Khan” beyond any other I’ve encountered throughout this study. I shall therefore endeavor to provide here a concise summary of his theory in order to thereafter examine “Kubla Khan” as magical poetry.

One can perhaps best begin to understand Lévy-Bruhl’s theory by observing how distinct his views on magic were to those of his colleagues during his years as a philosopher at the University of Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although his writings heavily draw upon psychology and anthropology, then young fields in philosophy and science,  

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61 Abstract from Spurr’s article “Myths of Anthropology: Eliot, Joyce, Lévy-Bruhl”: “The emerging science of anthropology created myths of the primitive that became important to literary modernism's mythic interpretation of contemporary history. T. S. Eliot and James Joyce in particular were attracted to the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose theory of the mentalité primitive appeared to offer alternatives to prevailing modes of Western logic. Eliot took this myth of anthropology and other ones at face value insofar as they contributed to his theories of poetic origins and to his attacks on modern civilization.”

62 Indeed, Greenwood recognizes Lévy-Bruhl’s influence upon her own scholarship in *The Anthropology of Magic*. 
he frequently distances himself from their foremost thinker’s claims, such as those of Tylor and Frazer, as well as Freud’s burgeoning work in psychoanalysis. The cultural consciousness of tribal peoples was a subject of great interest to such social investigators at this emergent juncture in the history of ideas, and while they broadly altogether framed such peoples’ magical practices as little more than bad science, Lévy-Bruhl urged his readers to “let us abandon the attempt to refer to their mental activity as an inferior variety of our own” (Lévy-Bruhl, *Natives*, 76). While he first referred to his theory as that of “primitive mentality,” having based it upon a variety of well-established indigenous ethnographies, he later renamed it “mystical mentality” because he saw this aspect of consciousness as not only “present in every human mind” but also as entirely different from the mentality that characterized scientific thought (Littleton, *Natives*, xxi).

Where the scientific mindset relies upon rules of deduction in order for its operations to make

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63 Just as Freud is one of the great architects of psychology, so Tylor and Frazer were foundational to the development of anthropology. All three thinkers’ views on magic have heavily influenced the general sense of magic in the western world today. Encyclopaedia Britannica offers a brief outline of this history:

“Because of the impact of anthropological theory on the study of magic, its development and history bear reviewing. The first important figure in this line of inquiry was Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, whose *Primitive Culture* (1871) regarded magic as a "pseudo-science" in which the "savage" postulated a direct cause-effect relationship between the magical act and the desired outcome. Tylor regarded magic as "one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind," but he did not approach it as superstition or heresy. Instead he studied it as a phenomenon based on the "symbolic principle of magic," a scheme of thought founded on a rational process of analogy. He also realized that magic and religion are parts of a total system of thought. Although he believed that magic and animistic beliefs became less prevalent in the later stages of history, he did not view magic and religion as alternative stages in the evolutionary development of mankind.

“That conclusion would be left for Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890), in which he ordered magic, religion, and science in a grandiose evolutionary scheme. Magic preceded religion because, according to Frazer, the former was logically more simple. This notion, however, was based on his erroneous assumption that the Australian Aborigines, examples of a “primitive” people, believed in magic but not in religion.

[...] “Sigmund Freud’s influential view of magic as the earliest phase in the development of religious thought (*Totem and Taboo*, 1918) followed Frazer’s model and posited an essential similarity between the thought of children, neurotics, and “savages.” According to Freud, all three assumed that wish or intention led automatically to the fulfillment of the desired end. This reductionist view, based on outmoded notions about "primitive" cultures, was revised as the result of new field research.”

64 Littleton goes so far as to claim that Lévy-Bruhl was “the first modern scholar to take non-Western modes of thinking seriously, and to accord them a modicum of respect” (xliii).
Anthropologist Soter Mousalimas explains Lévy-Bruhl’s principle of participation as a kind of knowledge of contradiction: “participation allow[s] multinumeration, consubstantiality and multilocation. In other words, it allow[s] something to be both singular and plural, both itself and something else, both here and elsewhere at the same time” (41). Lévy-Bruhl grounded this pluralistic sense, in which “objects, beings, phenomena can be [...] both themselves and something other than themselves,” in a particular set of “collective representations,” which he saw as fundamental to most any encounter with mysticism (Lévy-Bruhl, 76). He borrowed the idea of “collective representations” from sociologist David Émile Durkheim, who saw them as the building blocks of social reality; they were the symbols and signs “‘common to the members of a given social group,’ had existence beyond the individual members, and were ‘transmitted from one generation to another’” (Mousalimas, 37). For Lévy-Bruhl, such “collective representations” showed a way in which mystical forces could be imperceptible yet still taken as reality by its participants. Durkheim also claimed such collective representations created “sentiments of respect, fear, adoration, and so on” in their participants. Significantly, for Lévy-Bruhl, the collective representations that structure “mystical mentality” are almost entirely created by affectivity. “Participation is felt, not thought,” he tells us (Lévy-Bruhl, Notebooks, 157). Mystical inspiration was inherently “the feeling [...] of the presence, and often of the

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65 This was Lévy-Bruhl’s central idea as a thinker; he devoted seven books to this theory.
66 Durkheim introduced this concept in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.
action of an invisible power” (Notebooks, 102). And more broadly, mystical consciousness involved the co-mingling and eventual total union of one’s cognitive and sensory experience:

[Mystical] experience involved two perceptions simultaneously: the sensory perception of physical things and the affective perception of the invisible power. The two perceptions ‘intertwined and interlaced’. They intermixed continuously, and this intermixing was the experience of participation. It felt the mystical (the affections) to be in the physical world. It also felt single things to be multiple and in many places at once. (Mousalimas, 43)

One perhaps hears in such predications, among a great many other epiphanic expressions, Whitman’s axiom, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (“Song of Myself,” 1324-26). While Lévy-Bruhl focused his critical interests far more on philosophy and science than literature and art, such a theory clearly brings greater confluence between these often seemingly disparate fields of knowledge. This is perhaps best evidenced by his influence on Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, who, rejecting his mentor Freud’s reduction of literature and art to neuroses, adapted this “principle of participation” to an alternative psychology that strives to work alongside a culture’s poets and critics.

While several twentieth century scholars have drawn upon Jung’s analytical psychology to reveal archetypal behavior in “Kubla Khan,” his theories represent more than anything else a cultural indicator here, one that yet again shows “Kubla Khan” as a shared lyrical container of enchantment and sacro-secular crisis across a historical arc through being anchored in the

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67 Lévy-Bruhl further writes, “In the collective representations of the primitive mentality, objects, beings, and phenomena can be, in a way incomprehensible to us, both themselves and other than themselves. In a way no less incomprehensible, they give forth and receive mystical forces, virtues, qualities, and influences, which are felt apart from them without ceasing to remain where they are” (Natives, 76-77).

68 Jung examines this subject and elaborates on what distinguishes science from art more broadly in his essay “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry” (301-22).

69 e.g. Maud Bodkin’s “Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies in Imagination”; S.K. Heninger Jr.’s “A Jungian Reading of “Kubla Khan” and Robert Silhol’s “Kubla Khan”: Genesis of an Archetype.”
schematics of Lévy-Bruhl’s theory. This is arguably most validated by the fact that Jung has become one among a select number of history’s most influential psychologists, and that spirituality, magic, religion, mythology, and the arts are uniquely central to his theory’s praxis. Part of the entire exegesis on “Kubla Khan” we can thus say already comprises criticism that interprets the text as a document of spiritual psychology, little different from scripture, spells, or mystical writings, as seen from the secular outposts of a cognitive science. Does “Kubla Khan” accomplish an efficacy that a scientist can depend upon? Might ministers integrate such a poem into their treatments for those suffering spiritual sickness and seeking help? These are questions that go far beyond the scope of this paper, which, again, hopes only to attempt some sense of an order to the chaotic confluence between magic, sacro-secular crisis, and poetry in “Kubla Khan.”

One may note, however, the so-called “healing potential” of spiritual crises, as recognized by the Jung-influenced Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, a John Hopkins researcher and one of the principal developers of transpersonal psychology (7):

some of the dramatic experiences and unusual states of mind that traditional psychiatry diagnoses and treats as mental diseases are actually crises of personal transformation, or “spiritual emergencies.” Episodes of this kind have been described in sacred literature of all ages as a result of meditative practices and as signposts of the mystical path. When these states of mind are properly understood and treated supportively rather than suppressed by standard psychiatric routines, they can be healing and have very beneficial effects on the people who experience them. This positive potential is expressed in the term spiritual emergency, which is a play on words, suggesting both a crisis and an opportunity of rising to a new level of awareness, or “spiritual emergence.”
Grof’s phrasing of “crisis” as “emergency” is useful in the way it articulates thought ambidextrously, much as this chapter presses the reader to navigate sense and sensory experience at once. It enables us to conceive of Coleridge’s magical episodes, whether in his hands, those of his critics, or any among his readers, as cognitive events of “emergence” and “opportunity” rather than as psychological fragments of nonsense. It also provides a means by which to consider such cognitive experiences outside the constraints of mental health and illness. One may, through the poetry, join Coleridge, when he tells us, “My case is a species of madness, only that it is a derangement, an utter impotence of the Volition, and not of the intellectual faculties” (Blackwood, 560). Thus, while this “emergency” of “Volition,” or willpower, unmoors one’s sanity, and thereby causes an unavoidable critical confrontation to take place, it also compels an intellectual “opportunity of rising to a new level of awareness.” And this craze of disorientation and elevated thought would seem to characterize more the standard than the exception among a culture’s most affecting poets. Thus the British poet Roddy Lumsden tells us “a poet confessing to mental illness is like a weight lifter admitting to muscles” (iv). Grof’s transpersonal psychoanalysis, grounded upon Levy-Bruhl’s theory, to some degree, allows a reader to enter Blake’s prophetic visions or, for that matter, John’s Book of Revelation (Brettler, 2153) without completely losing the spring line that keeps their vessel safely bound to

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70 Grof bases his interpretation of crisis on “the Chinese pictogram for crisis [which, in his view] perfectly represents the idea of spiritual emergency. It is composed of two basic signs, or radicals: one of them means “danger” and the other “opportunity.” Thus, while passage through this kind of condition is often difficult and frightening, these states have tremendous evolutionary and healing potential. If properly understood and treated as difficult stages in a natural developmental process, spiritual emergencies can result in spontaneous healing of various emotional and psychosomatic disorders, favorable personality changes, solutions to important problems in life, and evolution toward what some call “higher consciousness” (7).

71 See James Whitehead’s Madness and the Romantic Poet: A Critical History

72 see The Complete Illuminated Books of William Blake
the secular port. The critic, with the right participatory equipment, theoretically, need not take Foucault’s hand and “return, in history, to that zero point [...] at which madness is a not yet divided experience [...] which relegates Reason and Madness to one side or the other” (Madness, ix), in order to access such a “will to knowledge” (Sexuality, 1). Rather, like the great polymath Benjamin Franklin, one may fly the kite into the storm, harness lightning, contain its electricity, observe its operations, and provide a conduit and release for it, without ever being electrocuted.73 One may, via participation, it seems, paradoxically, both hold and behold poetry’s enchantment.

While Franklin embodied the zeitgeist of his age and changed the course of history through his discoveries, inventions, and political maneuverings, scholars such as Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt74 have provided a means of magnification through which to examine the literature of a Franklin or Coleridge as cultural artifacts participating in an ongoing history. One might, for instance, consider how the electricity of “Kubla Khan” participates in the age-old discursive world of magic and poetry through the word *vates*, a noun, meaning “a poet [...] who is divinely inspired,” that merges the cultural embodiments of the poet and the spiritual magician into a singular figure and has its roots in Germanic and Celtic languages as well as Latin and Greek, all of which fizzle down in the philologist’s beaker to the ancient utterance *ueh*, the Indo-European75 word for *seer* (De Vaan, 656) (Maier, 278). Morris Berman traces such mythopoetic inspiration, what he refers to as “Homeric or pre-Homeric mentality,” “original participation,”

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73 see Franklin’s *Autobiography and Other Writings*

74 For greater elaboration on Greenblatt’s theory and development of “new historicism” and “cultural poetics,” see *The Powers of Forms in English Renaissance* as well “Towards a Poetics of Culture.”

75 It is worth noting that nearly half the speaking world derives from this ancient family of languages, by far the largest language family across the entire planet, and so one may posit that this relationship between poetry and magic bears significance in the linguistic world’s broader collective imagination.
and “participating consciousness,” phrases similar to Lévy-Bruhl’s, back to the origins of western civilization (343):

[T]his tradition had been the principal mode of consciousness in Greece down to the fifth or sixth century before Christ, and during that period it served as the sole vehicle for learning and education. Poetry was an oral medium. It was recited before a large audience that memorized the verses in a state of autohypnosis. Plato used the term mimesis, or active emotional identification, to describe this submission to the spell of the performer, a process with physiological effects that were both relaxing and erotic, and that involved a total submergence of oneself into the other. (72)

A dominant aspect of the experience of poetry was thus for the whole culture of Ancient Greece, not only its priests and oracles, a magico-religious event of consciousness, and the same observation applies to the modern Yakut culture in Siberia or to any community that invokes scripture during religious ceremonies. According to Berman, Plato, much like Freud millenia later, saw this “poetic or Homeric mentality [...] as exemplified by the Greek poetic tradition, as pathological,” yet also, like Lamb and Hazlitt, he saw that despite its seemingly nonsensical expressions, it held a striking cognitive and cultural power; and, like Whitman, for Plato, “poetry [...] spoke of contradictory experiences [and] described a “many-aspect man” of inconsistent traits and perceptions” (72). Such observations once again conform to the mold of Lévy-Bruhl’s theory of magical participation, and we can thus ground the experience of poetical enchantment, as found in the exegesis on “Kubla Khan,” in a discourse traveling back to literature’s originary culture and perhaps still further into prehistoric culture as well, such as is found among those magical painted cave walls in Lascaux and the decorated bones within Africa’s steppes.

76 Berman’s findings on Greek consciousness are largely based on E. A. Havelock’s Preface to Plato.
As is often said about written works that have changed the course of history (e.g. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” (101-6); Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; Enheduanna’s “Sumerian Temple Hymns”77), “Kubla Khan” bears such import to the modern experience of poetical enchantment due to exactly when and where it happened in the confluence of other major world events. Coleridge wrote the poem in an age of tremendous cultural upheaval that spurred a sacro-secular crisis of consciousness,78 the shockwaves of which the modern world is undoubtedly still riding out today. He also created the poem during the same period that produced *Lyrical Ballads*, what is often hailed as the Romantic movement’s “seminal, inspirational work” and from which the bulk of modern lyric poetry, as well as its broader representative culture, have arguably been developed (Pelican, 221). Thus, while “Kubla Khan” was not published with the *Ballads*, it certainly grew out of the then-emergent consciousness that created it. Rather, as though it contained too much meaning (its significance, obvious yet overwhelmingly cryptic) to either brush aside or have immediately printed, Coleridge held onto the lines for nearly twenty years, bearing a certain resemblance in this respect to Charles Darwin, who waited a similar length before releasing his pivotal and transcendent theory of all life upon the world stage.79 Both also greatly marveled upon human consciousness and grounded their views about the sentient universe within the simultaneity of a fixed and fluid state. Natural selection corroborates each singular organism as a participant in the flux of an ever-shifting

77 Enheduanna, a poet and high priestess, is “the earliest known author of literature [...] who lived in ancient Mesopotamia around 2300 BC” (Meador, i).
78 As Eric Hobsbawm outlines in his landmark text *The Age of Revolution: Europe: 1789–1848*, soon after the scientific revolution came to an end, Britain found its imperial nation on a global stage, straddling the industrial revolution, the French revolution, and the American revolution.
79 see Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*
species. Equally, as I will soon enough show, the magical poetics of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” can be corroborated through Lévy-Bruhl’s theory of participation. However, while Darwinian evolution became a familiar chapter in modernity’s foremost cultural narratives, Coleridge and Lévy-Bruhl have come, with difficulty, to highlight the strangeness of such a culture’s relationship to its sense of the arts, magic, and religion.

While a great deal about the strangeness of poetical enchantment can be made accessible through considering “Kubla Khan” as an object of history and culture, as I have just strived to do, the way such ideas play out through the actual language of the poem can reveal far more. Northrop Frye believed a reader could actually discern the cultural consciousness of a poem based upon whether a poet expressed rhythm in their poetry “as process” or “as product” (130-31). Indeed, it was this that led him to famously coin the appellation “age of sensibility,” after recognizing a vast swath of poetry that collectively exhibited certain formal behaviors different from the Augustan and Romantic conventions that chronologically bordered it:

In poetry the sense of literature as a finished product normally expresses itself in some kind of regularly recurring metre [...] In listening to Pope’s couplets we have a sense of continually fulfilled expectation [...] When we turn from Pope to the age of sensibility [...] our ears are assaulted by unpredictable assonances, alliterations, interrhymings and echolalia [...] The reason for these intensified sound-patterns is [...] an interest in the poetic process as distinct from the product. (132-33)

Set in contrast to the Augustan production of poetry, as well the Romantics, who “tended to see the poem as the product of the creative imagination” (134), “Kubla Khan” hinges its power more upon aspects of psychological process, poetical mimesis, and magical participation, perhaps all synonyms in English literature’s broader thesaurus. However, it very much nears form, and seems, as its syntax and musicality show, to want greater conformity. Perhaps we
might say its rhythms rise upon the late eighteenth century waves of “sensibility” while crashing down at the same time into the birth throes of Romantic formalism. Of course, this is very theoretical, so let us turn to the poem to observe how its sensory song compels us in practice.

**Porlock, Xanadu, Etc.**

If the shape of consciousness resembles a stream, then our intellect is most often little better than a cupped hand, capturing the endless spill for a moment, if we’re lucky. As the above section exemplifies, it is thus quite a challenge to articulate thoughts through language that attempt to capture how consciousness might be contained and released through poetry. I shall therefore think of the reader from this point forward to be just as much an experiencer who contains the embodiment of the poem as a critic abstracting its paramount ideas. While the location wherein a particle becomes a wave remains undisclosed, poetry, as well magic, as I have stated throughout this chapter, are critical events located within human consciousness, and such consciousness dwells within the flesh and blood of the sensory body. Coleridge makes this ordering self-evident through the manner in which he constructs “Kubla Khan.” He grounds the poem in a dream that he claims to have dreamt while asleep in a historically verifiable, embodied reality. This vulnerable position perhaps transcends even the vulnerability of the confessionalist poets; he remains just as in the mystery of the thing as his readers; much like T.S. Eliot, it is so immersive, he cannot even bring himself to outright declare it as poetry. It is seemingly too within him, as it is, seemingly, too within us, once we embody its emergence. Although we cannot occupy the same exact location in spacetime that Coleridge inhabited when he wrote the poem, nor can we embody Coleridge’s own dynamic consciousness, it would seem we begin
through the language from the same point-of-view as the author, a place of general confusion and awareness, the narrator, able to perceive a great and significant narrative, but no more reliable than we are as to its particular function. In short, the words do not represent an idea but an event: it is something that has simply happened to him, as it is now happening to us. Thus, before Coleridge’s readers have even wholly encountered the poem, or, for that matter, its magic, they may observe a general crisis of meaning has already begun to take possession of them.

When we consider more closely the initial manner through which we receive the poem, as it was originally published, it notably begins far from the way one would characterize a mystical consciousness. Rather, the reader begins with an explanatory prose that recounts the way in which the poem came to be. An impersonal tone characterizes the section, as though to assign this prosaic voice a sense of objective credibility. Not only is the creation of the poem presented as an event that took place some time ago (“In the summer of the year 1797”), but Coleridge doesn’t address the reader in first person, speaking instead in third person, only as “the Author,” as though to claim his subjective identity in this instance would make him an unreliable narrator (Poems, 228). While one may note a mystical element in this author claiming the poem came to him in a dream, the cause of this is shown in quite rational terms. Indeed, it comes from a scientifically verifiable source: “an anodyne,” presumably “prescribed” by a chemist for “a slight indisposition,” causes our author to fall “asleep in his chair” just “at the moment that he was reading” a sentence that resembles the first two lines of the poem. This is the rational world of cause and effect where “To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction” (Newton, 83), where even when considering such fantastical matters as poetry and dreams, things require scientific validation in order to be perceived as possessing secular credibility.
However, within this detached language, certain passages linger with participatory qualities that suggest things are much less stable than they appear. Coleridge for instance tells us he was “in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses,” a statement which insinuates that there are internal senses and that the mind may possess a profound capacity to be awake even while being in the midst of sleep. Instability can also be found in the way Coleridge tells us, “the images rose up before him as things,” a phrase that subtly captures how tenuous the distinction is between signifiers and their actual referents. The most direct and striking example of this instability occurs when the language suddenly shifts from prose to verse:

Then all the charm
Is broken — all that phantom world so fair
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,
And each misshape[s] the other. Stay awhile,
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes —
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, 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.                   (37-46)

A transformative emergence has occurred in the text’s form here, and with it, the content has changed, from a mentality structured by logically derived connections established through sentences to a poetic mentality structured by meter and lineation. Even prior to this shift, the closer the prose nears this poetical state, the more the language operates through figurative analogies and dream logic. Rather than continuing to document literal events, “the Author” makes imagistic comparisons, imagining his memories to be “like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast” (229). While we are no longer in what Lévy-Bruhl refers to as “scientific mentality,” neither can we ascertain that we have entered a mystical state.
Indeed, the verse literally expresses to us that Lévy-Bruhl’s “collective representations” of “mystical forces” and “invisible powers” are no longer here: “all the charm / Is broken -- all that phantom-world so fair / Vanishes.” Coleridge here instructs the reader to “Stay awhile,” and then “soon / The visions will return,” and thus “all the charm” as well. This is, in Frye’s words, poetry “as a finished product,” the product in this case being the idea of such charm becoming lost until its magical “fragments [...] come trembling back” and are “[re]unite[d].” Of course, “Kubla Khan” remains fragmentary as a poem, as Coleridge acknowledges (“but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!”), and thus the product-oriented mentality in the preface cannot suffice to resolve the crisis and restore the broken charm’s original power (229).

When we come to the first verse of the fragment, we are met with writing that demands an entirely different mentality than the prose and poetry that just preceded it:

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 blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

Whereas the prefatory paragraphs and lines of verse are representative of literature as product, the opening stanza of “Kubla Khan” exhibits a notably different rhythm of “intensified sound-patterns,” showing thereby that an intrinsic aspect of its meaning involves “the poetic process.” This musical dimension can be felt rather immediately in the alliteration and assonance of the syllables across the first two lines: “in” and “Xanadu”; “Xanadu” and “did;” “Kubla” and
“Khan”; “A” and “stately”; “Kubla” and “stately”; “pleasure” and “decree”; and “dome” and “decree.” While this rhythm frames the inner structure of the stanza, an outer rhyme scheme plays along as well, loosely held together by an unpredictable combination of staggered rhymes and couplets. In order to make sense of a poetry of process, Frye states the reader must acknowledge that “there is a primary stage in which [all] words are linked by sound, rather than sense [...] where rhyme is as important as reason” (133). Significantly, he compares such poetic mentality to the consciousness we possess when we dream or experience magic:

From the point of view of sense this stage is merely free or uncontrolled association, and in the way it operates it is very like the dream. Again like the dream, it has to meet a censor-principle, and shape itself into intelligible patterns. Where the emphasis is on the communicated product, the qualities of consciousness take the lead: a regular metre, clarity of syntax, epigram and wit, repetition of sense in antithesis and balance rather than of sound. [...] Where the emphasis is on the original process, the qualities of subconscious association take the lead, and the poetry becomes hypnotically repetitive, oracular, incantatory, dreamlike and in the original sense of the word charming. The response to it includes a subconscious factor, the surrendering to a spell. (133)

While the first stanza is not “hypnotically repetitive,” the significance and occurrence of rhythm as a mode of association in it could not be more apparent. Rhythm of such an order in Frye’s view is indicative of a magical system of “intelligible patterns.” Such a system rhymes with Durkheim’s “collective representations,” functioning in this case through the container of a poem rather than across an entire social network. Lévy-Bruhl’s theory that mystical collective representations are born out of affectivity suggests that in order to access this “incantatory, dreamlike” system of “intelligible patterns,” one must participate with the rhythm in a manner of feeling rather than thinking. Thus, just as concert-goers feel the beat, both alone and in unison,
and, in turn, dance to the music, so poetry of such an order and magnitude rhythmically
generates a means for all readers to feelingly participate in its world.80

While we may locate these rhythms within an imaginative consciousness, the imagistic
world of the poem is grounded in conventional landscape settings. The first stanza provides a
sensory vision which entails a “river,” “caverns,” “walls and towers,” “gardens,” “forests” and
“hills.” However, just as we are placed in the familiar, we have clearly entered an
unconventional imaginative territory as well. The exotic names of “Kubla Khan” and “Alph,”
attached to the poem’s first cited landmarks, become signs of endorsement for a world of
“collective representations” that are unfamiliar and strange. The rhythmical manner in which
Coleridge sweeps us off to “Xanadu” in his first line is reminiscent of the “once upon a time”
phrase so often used by fairy tales to carry our thoughts off, as mythographer Marina Warner
writes, to “imaginary territory -- a magical elsewhere of possibility” (xviii). In such territories,
our thoughts as readers become occupied by a mystical mentality in which multi-location is
possible. From the poem’s very first lines, we appear to be “here and elsewhere,” in Xanadu and
“a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton” (229), in a rhythmically enchanted dream
world with a “sacred river” and “forests ancient as the hills” as well in the secular world that
receives this fragment as nonsense, madness, and “psychological curiosity.”

80 Summer J. Star examines the neuroaesthetics and poetics of this phenomenon in “Reading It Properly: The
Poetics of Performance and Tennyson’s "Merlin and Vivien."” Star shows, compellingly, that by placing critical
emphasis on the “imagination of movement” as opposed to the reader’s “visual register,” one can understand a great
deal about this lyrical affectivity: “I argue that, particularly in the case of Tennyson's dramatic and dramatic
narrative poems, passages that require deep prosodic attention are closely associated with the imagining of physical
movements and gestures, an association that results in their high affective impact. Because it is instigated by rhythm,
by the production and channeling of tension and expansion in the lines, dramatic or what we might even think of as
a choreographical imagining is different from images linked to diction and descriptive specificity. Dramatic
imagining begins in the reader or listener's muscles: as much felt as (and necessarily before) it is seen” (226).
A great journey of consciousness has already been undertaken from the preface to the end of the first stanza, and, yet, the plunge does not fully take hold until the second verse, in which it is as though we are hurled into the sudden intensity of the dream: “But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!” (12-13). The word “But” signals a directional shift in point-of-view that will unfold for the duration of the poem. The speaker of the poem is so swept up in this shift, he exclaims “oh!” as though to say he is here too, falling “down the green hill” with us. The exclamation is so abrupt it seems this utterance is somehow part of the chasm, which it is, of course, when registered from a mystical point-of-view. This instance in which a passionate utterance functions as a magical connecting force becomes a paramount feature throughout the rest of the poem. In the next lines, it occurs again through the imagined figure of an impassioned woman: “A savage place! as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon lover!” (14-16). One infers rather immediately that the means by which the woman summons mystical forces, powerful enough to attempt raising the supernatural presence of a “demon lover,” occurs through her wailing, her passionate utterance, a kind of affect-driven charm song which again becomes tangled up in our experience of the chasm. It is also no coincidence that the entire stanza is composed in predominantly feminine endings, compared to the masculine endings framing the first verse. The hard masculine endings give the rhyme scheme a structural quality, as though to suggest the poem still contains an apparent architecture, while the latter feminine endings create a looser cadence, making the poetry less a container and more a free-flowing conduit. Her wailing possesses the whole musical arc of the verse, wherein the masculine dreamer and his feminine dream blur in the pluralistic experience of a shared linguistic consciousness.
It would be fair to say at this point we are in the throes of some kind of spiritual crisis. A “demon-lover” is, for the moment, wailing away within us. The “sensory perception” of the landscape and the “affective perception [...] of “invisible power[s],” of our speaker’s entire “holy and enchanted” hallucinatory perception, appear so “intertwined and interlaced,” it is hard to distinguish the one from the other, and that is, at least partially, the point. The communion of the poet with this environment has brought about a mystical experience in which things appear to be “intermixing” and thereby joined through participation. Just as the woman as well as the poem’s speaker are brought into this participatory state through invocation, so the rhythmic intelligence of these lines engages us to participate through its own incantatory sounds. The “waning moon,” from a rhythmical standpoint, holds a clear alliterative correspondence with the “woman wailing” in the following line. Thus, in a participatory context, in which rhyme rather than reason gives rise to a knowledge of “intelligible patterns,” the woman is as much a part of the moon as the moon is now a part of her wailing. Submerged in the mystical, rhythmical experience of the poet, both are “haunted by” and haunting each other. And, in our own union with this imaginary woman and moon, with this rhythmic incantation and its whole imaginary chasm, we too take part in this vision and are thus reasonably haunted as well.

The next eight lines make up one great sprawling sentence, unsurprisingly the longest throughout the poem, and in this great rhythmic length they expand the participatory field of vision to include all within the speaker’s sight as agents of mystical forces:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.

There is a powerful momentum from the first word, notably a conjunction, a word largely reserved for connecting multiple clauses and phrases. By placing “and” at the launch of the sentence, Coleridge seems to want the energy from the preceding lines without the intrusive hardware of a semicolon or dash, the rule of grammar being forced to bend to the poem’s will. This not only generates a greater rhythmic force in the poem but also without question brings our grammatical sensibilities within the participatory experience, the connective phrases quite literally toppling over the logistics of their linguistic structures in order to generate greater connectivity. This mentality, in which felt rhythm overruns sense, also appears in the syntax of the sentence. For instance, in the last line of the sentence, the adverb “momently” reads as though it ought to be placed before the phrase it modifies, “flung up”; however, by scrambling the syntax we are rhythmically driven to make other associations. One shift that occurs here is a greater emphasis is placed upon the shared action, both as an imagined event and as a linguistic rhythm, than on the separate actors, “this earth” and “the sacred river.” Our perception is thus framed more by felt movement than ideational images. Another rhythmical association that comes about through the syntactical emphasis placed upon the word “momently” is its noted repetition five lines earlier in the poem. Indeed, it seems to cue that very little has transpired over the course of these eight lines other than a moment by moment intensification in the participatory energy at work. While little more has occurred than water bursting from land, a tremendous amount of rhythmical forces have been released and joined. Just like the speaker’s “oh” and the woman’s “wail,” so too the earth here is seen as “breathing” out “fast thick pants,”
participating through an utterance of its own, its chant so passionate it causes the “rocks” to start “dancing” to its music. The “swift half-intermitted burst” remarkably resembles Lévy-Bruhl’s theory of intense “intermixing” as the experience of participation. This intense intermixing, what typified “the mystical experience” for Lévy-Bruhl, occurs here to such a degree that it overwhelms all else in its path. The “huge” rocks that resemble “hail” become, through being both enormous and miniature at once, mystically aligned. Coleridge further describes these rocks as “fragments,” a word he notably attributes to “Kubla Khan,” suggesting that its fragmentary verses are also involved in a greater participatory whole. Thus, the earlier product-oriented experience of the “broken charm” may in such a process-oriented state compel readers to possess a felt sense of restoration, and, thereby, to feel the poem’s enchantment.

Comparatively, a marked shift in the critical tone occurs in the final lines of the second stanza. Although we still remain without doubt in a world of mystical collective representations, whether one is to identify it in “the sacred river” or “ancestral voices,” we seem to be reverting back toward the first stanza rather than deeper into the romantic chasm:

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And ’mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war! (25-30)

While Khan is “hear[ing]” rather than “decree[ing]” and it is the river rather than the pleasure-dome which is here associated with the measurement of “five miles,” we are from a rhythmic point-of-view still very much in the same imagistic dimensions that were earlier presented to us. Like “the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast,” this second iteration of the initial
vision makes yet another fragment, in turn distancing the reader yet further from any rational view of the world in which things are not bounded on all sides by dream. The alliterative phrasing of “five miles meandering with a mazy motion” also casts this line of Alexandrine trochees in the dreamlike cadences of sprites and lullabies, as does the entrancing repetition of this scene, which recalls the Ancient Greeks’ recitation of poetry, performed “in a state of autohypnosis, [...] a process with physiological effects that were [...] relaxing” (Berman, 72). According to Berman, the Greeks engaged in this ritual of collective charm in order to bring “the unconscious in harmony with the conscious” as well as to authentically “experience” events rather than to “analyze and classify” them (72). As earlier noted, the mystical state in Homeric culture, brought about through a community member’s “submission to the spell” of a poet, created “a total submergence of oneself into the other” (71). Through the rhetoric of such charm, the conscious experience of readers is perhaps brought as inward as one may go into Coleridge’s unconscious dream state, the refrain of images giving to us the spellbinding experience of their expressed form.

While we have perhaps come to the zenith of this poem’s mystical inspiration—that state of “total submergence”—the penultimate and closing stanzas continue to exhibit many of the mystical qualities I have thus far outlined in the earlier stanzas. We continue to observe the experience of participation in phrases such as “the mingled measure / From the fountain and the cave” (lines 33 - 34) which imply a particular kind of intermixing in which an affective passionate utterance is connected directly to our sensory perception of physical things. Also, things which appear to be opposites continue to enter into a state of communion, such as the “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice,” a territory which seems to be in the midst of summer
and winter at once (36). Equally, “multinumeration, consubstantiality and multilocation” occur, as through the figure of the damsel, who we cannot help but associate with the “woman wailing” while at the same time not being certain they are meant to represent one and the same person; thus, we experience the “woman wailing,” the “damsel,” and the “Abyssinian maid” both separately and altogether. Collective representations also remain apparent, whether we observe them through the imaginative landmark of “Mount Abora” (41) or the magical act of “weav[ing] a circle” (51) to ward off mystical forces. Rhythmical language as well continues to function as a connective tissue in the mystical state, as for instance with the repetition of the word “float” which establishes a correlation between “The shadow of the dome of pleasure / float[ing] midway on the waves” with the speaker’s “floating hair” (31-32, 50). Yet despite all of this, the incantatory spirit of “ceaseless [...] seething” and “mazy motion,” which characterizes so much of the second stanza’s electricity, has lost some of this enchanted vitality by the poem’s end.

If we consider the poem as a whole, we can see it clearly transports us across a particular arc of consciousness, the journey one makes every day from the world of daylight to night and back again. We begin in the verifiable world of our thoughts--in a state of historical facts, scientific reason, philosophical rationality, and prosaic sense--and then gradually shift from a product-oriented to a process-oriented view of poetry. What begins self-consciously in reasonable terms drifts into a state in which the boundaries that separate self from other, poetry from poet, become completely obliterated. We fall with Coleridge, going as far into his dream as he is willing to bring us. Notably, it is the emergence of a vision of war, the ultimate social act of disharmony and dissonance, which causes the mystical state to spiral into a perpetual fragmentation. After the word “war,” not only does the line end with an exclamatory full stop
but the entire stanza breaks hard, as the following one jarringly shifts us elsewhere, neither
further into the depths nor even into the world of things but into the mere “shadow” of a reality
set upon a “trembling” surface (30-1). When we come to the final stanza, while we still continue
under the sway of its rhythms, the dream world only faintly remains. The timeless world of “at
once and ever” (23) has become merely “a vision once I saw” (37), the “sunny dome” (47) once
“a miracle” (35) is by the poem’s end nothing more than a thing our Author “would build” if
only he could (46). While we are left able to imagine “Paradise” (54) in the final moment, it
would seem we are finally not able to access it, at least from a non-magical point-of-view. Our
strange journey thus leaves us not in a mystical or scientific mentality but in a uniquely modern
poetical state, and it is this which I believe has given this work its astonishing legacy.

Of Poetry, Magic, and Secularity

While the way in which one experiences “Kubla Khan” is perhaps unique, compared to
anything else produced in Coleridge’s oeuvre, or perhaps even to all English literature, it
resolves its spiritual crisis in a manner that corresponds well with the poems I examined at the
beginning of this chapter. In “The Eolian Harp,” the speaker, reflecting upon his thoughts while
listening to the instrument’s “witchery of sound,” concedes with his lover, “Well hast thou said
and holily disprais’d / These shapings of the unregenerate mind” (54-55). Equally, the
supernatural recounting of “The Ancient Mariner” concludes for the wedding-guest upon a
somber note:

He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.  

(622-25, Poems)

These are not revelatory expressions but the remarks of one who has held and beheld the world in astonishment, and now, depressingly, no longer does. With every great flight, there must be a decent, or great fall, it would seem, in order for the journey to be complete. The tenor swings back to the vehicle, and the reader must endeavor upon a new metaphoric journey in order to reignite their alchemical consciousness (Richards, 96). However, in the case of “Khan,” we are not only relating allegorically to music-possessed lovers and story-haunted sailors: the story it tells, or, perhaps, sings, is about our own sacro-secular consciousness, and we are the embodiment of its crisis. The poem’s song seems, from the wide lens of critical culture, to work upon readers in a way that makes this pang a palpable element in the world they experience beyond the text. It addresses the mystical nature of our existence and our incapacity as awakened secularists to articulate and embody this. Thus, the speaker at the end of the poem leaps from his dream’s vision into “a vision once I saw” (38), much like Poe’s “dream within a dream” (97), and, therein, he appears as though in an overwhelming electrical storm (e.g. “His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” (50)). This is the electricity of consciousness and, like Franklin, we cast our kites into its otherworld to harness its magical lightning. Yet, while our speaker is wholly enchanted with feminine, rhythmical, participatory “symphony and song,” at the same time, he is likely also drooling, snoring, slumped back against a mediocre chair, imagining things that are not happening to anybody else, and, thus, paradoxically, there we are as well.

81 In The Philosophy of Rhetoric, I.A. Richards suggests “a first step [into understanding metaphor] is to introduce two technical terms to assist us in distinguishing from one another what Dr. Johnson called the two ideas that any metaphor, at its simplest, gives us. Let me call them the tenor and the vehicle” (96).
We can say then that a poem such as “Kubla Khan” brings us to a certain crossroads, and, perhaps, this is the intersection of the sacred and the secular, where we are perhaps in the modern world standing all the time. The poem compels us to go further, to keep slipping, all the way, onward into that endless magical, participatory “Paradise,” despite the fact that we must wake up. After all, no matter what worldview one possesses, the argument might go, a wild electricity is humming all around us, either way. The reader seems to be placed in this final moment next to Wallace Stevens, when he writes, “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly” (903). However, the poem, as does its poet, seems to know that one must be feelingly moved to such “exquisite truth” and “poetic faith.” Thus, like Flannery O’Connor’s Misfit, who tells us about a grandmother, “She would have been a good woman […] if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life,” so “Kubla Khan” cannot be there to religiously move us through to the end of our secular days, over and over and over again (153). This is why the poem depends so heavily not simply on mystical transcendence but the enacting of an actual magic power. With no religious system upon which a secular reader may depend, Coleridge dares us to “weave a circle round him thrice,” calling out from across time, bidding us to perform our own ceremonial rite. We are then perhaps no further in consciousness from the poet then the poet is from a shaman crossing through a portal into a dream.

It certainly seems that “Kubla Khan” wants its readers to grasp the nature of power in relation to the nature of consciousness. It is for instance notable that the poem’s central figure is an emperor who orders by “decree” a “dome” to “compass” round a “measureless” territory, and that it is the figure of a poet who attempts by his socio-linguistic powers to wield this magical
empire into existence. It is also noticeable that in this realm, there is no mention of popes, ministers, churches, or, for that matter, God. In the world of dreams, poets and their readers would seem to possess as much power as priest-kings. This associative, rhythmic energy, grounded in Lévy-Bruhl’s principle of participation, seems to wield such unthinkable power that Coleridge imagines others crying out “Beware! Beware!” in terror of being completely devoured by such unleashed forces (49). Yet this release perhaps is just the thing that has compelled so many readers to contain the poem’s crisis on their own terms. It is no surprise therefore that the poem commands us, “close your eyes with holy dread,” for the songful demon that was once Coleridge’s, now possesses his readers and must be met on their own terms (52). In such analogies, poetry is not like a charm but in fact is a spell, binding together a vast psychological multiplicity from throughout the reader’s consciousness.

That magical profusion of sacro-secular consciousness is best exemplified through the tremendous literary outpouring that “Kubla Khan” has manifested over these past two centuries. Altogether, such an accumulation arguably comes closer to wholly encapsulating the modern experience of poetical enchantment more than anything else. It is to the French poet-critic Charles Baudelaire that we owe our common usage of the phrase “modern” in respect to the past two centuries of literature and art. He describes it as “that indefinable something we may be allowed to call ‘modernity’ [...] to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory” (106). While he continues his critique with painting in mind, it would seem equally applicable to poetry:

Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable. There was a form of modernity for every painter of the past; the majority of the fine portraits that remain to us from former times are clothed in
the dress of their own day. They are perfectly harmonious works because the dress, the hairstyle, and even the gesture, the expression and the smile (each age has its carriage, its expression and its smile) form a whole, full of vitality. You have no right to despise this transitory fleeting element, the metamorphoses of which are so frequent, nor to dispense with it. If you do, you inevitably fall into the emptiness of an abstract and indefinable beauty, like that of the One and only woman of the time before the Fall. If for the dress of the day, which is necessarily right, you substitute another, you are guilty of a piece of nonsense that only a fancy-dress ball imposed by fashion can excuse. (107)

In the case of “Kubla Khan,” we are brought into contact with a kind of poem that in its day was anything but fashionable to writers such as Hazlitt and Lamb. It was “guilty” of being “a piece of nonsense” in such critics’ eyes because it appeared costumed in medieval and Homeric themes for a modern occasion. And yet, the reasoning and psychology that scaffold the poem give to it an undeniable modern style and outfit. Equally, the mystical mentality that charges its verses could easily be framed as possessing the mark of “the eternal and the immovable.” However, even this does not do nearly enough in the way of summarizing the “vitality” that “Kubla Khan” has managed to achieve since its arrival. In his day, Coleridge was only one among several poets who saw magic and poetry as interrelated activities. And this was only one among several of his own poems that broached that most mysterious relationship. Yet what is perhaps most astonishing about “Kubla Khan” is not that it entails a kind of lyric enchantment, but that it expresses and generates such enchantment in wholly modern, secular terms. It does not attempt to express “an abstract and indefinable” sense of magic but rather, as I have attempted to show, gives to us a fragmentary experience, characteristic of modern life, and thereby “forms a whole, full of vitality.” In moments such as when Coleridge writes “Could I revive within me,” we are met by a phrase that is as full of affectivity and vitality to our age’s spirituality as the phrase
“Jesus wept” (John.11.35, *King James Version*)\(^8\) might have meant in ages past. In its lines, we encounter not a historical sense of magico-religious expression, but enchantment raw, immediate, and ubiquitous as the direct experience of language.

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\(^8\) This line has been celebrated for being the shortest line in the KJV’s Bible. Its lyrical brevity has preserved it in the cultural consciousness. Indeed, I last heard it spoken in a colloquial manner hardly a month ago by an old English man as a small but crowded room of us watched England lose to Italy in the 2021 European Football Championship on a television in a supposedly haunted pub tucked far away among the Northern fells of Lakeland.
Coda: A Soft Polemic

Here at the end of this endeavor, it occurs to me that a thesis is less a grand work of prose and more simply what survives the long and arduous journey of an idea that is given a chance. Throughout the making of this one, I have hesitated to frame my thoughts in any manner that evokes a political rhetoric out of a fear that such judgment could narrow the possibilities for useful discoveries of one kind or another. More than anything, I have hoped to reveal the genuine and worthwhile curiosity of my chosen subject rather than prove why my views about it might be the right ones in contrast to others. I have strived to be not just a critic in this sense but a witness and even participant of magical knowledge as well. However, magic is so saturated with contentious ideas of private and public power, of boundaries and systems, it would be naive to suggest that this study transcends the realm of my own political bias and personal belief, and I would be remiss if I didn’t make some attempt to clarify that.

It is worthwhile, for instance, to point out that my interest in magic is largely born out of my interest in poetry, which, as a reader and writer of such a genre, has become both a deeply personal occupation for me, as well as a discipline that has been most publicly contextualized through the forums of academia. While I certainly learned to appreciate the long and venerable tradition of the liberal arts in such places, I have never felt comfortable communicating about its beauty there. In the modern university, romantic sentiments are often so crowded with ideas that they seem to express nothing more than irony, and this has and continues to confuse me to no end. In my experience, a feeling of trespass enters a classroom when on that rare occasion a professor or student dares to show the affective significance of art and literature upon us. Yet in truth, I have never really understood why anybody would devote their days to the study of poetry
if not to more thoroughly appreciate its beauty, nor am I convinced that all scholars are not simply lovers attempting to validate their most serious admiration. I often have wondered how different the humanities might be today if only each student and teacher were able to acknowledge to one another the fundamental mystery of their shared interest.

It has therefore been a great sadness for me to look in awe with so many others upon so much beauty, only to find that this shared truth nearly always gets squandered by political arguments and cultural estrangement. It is almost enough to resign one to subscribe to Max Weber’s declaration that “the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world” (16). For more than a century now, Weber’s claim has sent a whole range of writers looking for magic in modernity so as to counter this prophesied gloom and thereby re-enchant us. While I would not go so far as to frame myself as one such re-enchanter, I do believe that this thesis makes rather evident that poetry and all the arts involve aspects of magic far more than our institutions make clear to us. The methods of science have such tremendous influence on modern education today that it often appears simply as reality to us rather than as a way to understand the world. And although religion is not often taught so much as theology in academia, most universities comprise a department of comparative religious studies. In contrast, a student would be lucky to come across a single course on magic at their school, or even a single lecture. My point here is that our schools teach us from an early age that science and religion, and even the humanities, are significant and powerful forms of cultural knowledge, but this is not so when it comes to magic.

Although western culture continues to be riddled by the age-old enchantments of folklore and mythology, charm seems to be a dead or foreign language throughout much of the academic
world. When anthropologists and historians do turn their attention to magic, the great majority still struggle to find any satisfactory definition of the term in its most basic sense. As my thesis shows, this by no means implies that scholars are not considering the subject of magic today; one might go so far as to observe that the academic journal *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* devotes all its articles to the subject; however, outside such specialization, the general public is poorly informed and educated on this aspect of our culture. While many people can easily get a gist for the nature of most academic disciplines by their names alone (psychology, art history, physics, etc.), there is little if anything that is clear about the study of magic at the onset. I understood so little about magic at first, having had so little critical exposure to it, I would likely never have taken the subject seriously had I not come across so many poets throughout the history of western literature referring to it. This is one of the central reasons why my thesis is at its core more representative of the exploration of a subject than an argument about one.

There was a period in my youth when I thought one could argue their way to the truth, as though higher knowledge was simply a crown jewel for the winner of the debate. I would listen intently to peoples’ views and turn their perspectives round and round until I was able to find a hole in their reasoning. Although at the time I felt I was constantly looking for answers to big questions, I almost always found myself explaining to others why they appeared to be either wrong or right about their point-of-view. When it came to literature, I would often read poems

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83 Notably, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* Associate Editor Michael D. Bailey writes that although magic has been the focus of intense scholarship for more than a century, there remains “no simple methodological solution to the definition or study of magic […] moreover, terminology for and concepts of magic are almost universally vague, mutable, and "occult" in the literal sense of hidden or obscured” (22). While such ambiguity clouds one’s ability to comprehend any definitive concept of magic, Bailey writes “this instability […] evident in so many contexts, [ironically brings] a kind of unifying focus” (3) to the world of enchantment.
and stories as though they were not works of art but arguments as well. In general, I found it was hard to understand something if it wasn’t taking a clear position. Yet while people could spar back and forth with me, a poem would simply say what only its words could. If I felt powerfully moved in some way by a poem, the lines would in one way or another evade my intellectual power, no matter what argumentative approach I took to decipher it. Poetry, I discovered, at its core, thrives on such esotericism. It relies upon the polysemantic expression of symbols and sounds in order to communicate its cryptic information. And it was, at least partly, in this way that I became far more interested in attempting to grasp how such poems so mysteriously moved readers than whether I supported or opposed their particular arguments. The more enamored I became with this experience of aesthetic enchantment, the stronger my aversion grew toward any poetry that was presented in an overtly argumentative or political manner. Art and politics then seemed really no closer together for me than the separation of church from state for society.

Today, I am not longing so much for public argument or private contemplation but for a general ongoing discussion in which academics and artists work together to bring the secular and the sacred more often into conversations around poetry and the humanities. If for no other purpose, the arts would seem to be here to draw us culturally closer together in this way, and yet they have seemed so much more often to divide so many across my life. There are many in my generation who are quiet and sad and who seem to have largely forgotten how to talk openly about the fantastic domain of the human soul, yet they still look upon its art in awe. Of course, we still gather in classrooms and talk about poems; however, the vast majority of graduate, undergraduate, and pre-university students I have met have found they just don’t get poetry. Perhaps it is not all that surprising that Marianne Moore famously said of poetry, “I too
dislike it,” (“Poetry”), or that the Hollywood blockbuster The Big Short (2015) humorously observed “most people fucking hate poetry.” Statements such as these one might throw under the broad umbrella of cynicism more than anything else, and yet it would seem this sentiment goes beyond mere cynicism. We have lost some means of access to a special kind of knowledge that is absolutely central to the general transmission of our culture. An engagement with the traditions of magical thinking is by no means a cure-all to this issue, nor am I in search of some wholly re-enchanted academia, but perhaps such knowledge could make us more open and honest about our experience of the arts. Those who don’t appreciate poetry might come around more, and the many of us who spend our days reading and writing might find this passing down of lyrical wonder from one generation to the next a more shared and hopeful endeavor.

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[…]

“Consideration.”

“Crisis.”

“Critical.”

“Free Verse.”

“Grimoire.”

“Neighbor.”

“Profane.”

“Rejoice.”

“Read.”

“Semantic.”

“Sense.”
“Sensation.”
“Spell.”
“Verse.”
“Witchcraft.”
“Word.”


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