

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School
in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

This book proposes, in effect, a new method of literary criticism, or, at any rate, a mutation of existing practice among English-speaking critics. The intention is to explore the possibilities of a literary criticism which can absorb and bring to bear on literature the work of other disciplines. A full history of the higher criticism as such is not intended; there is, however, every reason, both conventional and novel, to treat the higher criticism. Surprisingly, no full history of the higher criticism exists in English, and no full history of the higher critical movement in England exists in any language. Even the most authoritative English accounts are sketchy and partial, rely on Victorian sources, convey inadequate knowledge of the major German sources, show little grasp of the place of the higher criticism in a general European movement of ideas and equally little of the very specific local history of its reception and practice in England. They place their emphasis largely on the late, that is, the mid-nineteenth-century history of the movement without any indication of its lively earlier history in England. Accounts of current views are largely a-historical. From the literary point of view, the situation is, if anything, even less satisfactory: there is no treatment whatsoever of Coleridge's relation to the higher criticism, though he was, if not an innovator, one of its subtlest exponents, and his religious thought in general cannot be understood without it; nor is there any adequate treatment of the effects of the movement on George Eliot's practice as a novelist. Indeed, there is no satisfactory account of its effect on any English author, despite constant glancing allusions to it in critical and scholarly treatments of the Victorians.

No single book could hope to remedy all these defects at once. I shall be content if the present book does something to bring out the reception in England in the second half of the eighteenth century of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

mythological school of German criticism as it was shaped by Herder and Eichhorn, and the continuity with the more familiar history of Victorian controversy, while, on the literary side, illuminating the attitudes of a very few of its leading practitioners.

This book is, then, a history of ideas; it might even be termed 'literary sociology' in so far as it recognizes the need to consider the entire milieu of a work of art, in its intimate relations with artistic creation, and not simply to offer superficial and perfunctory 'background' history. This is perhaps the most pressing problem in criticism now, and it has been treated variously and suggestively by Continental critics: by Lukács everywhere in his work, by Sartre in *La Critique de la raison dialectique*, translated in part as *The Question of Method*, by Lucien Goldmann in *Le Dieu caché*, and by Roland Barthes, in a succession of works, especially *Critique et vérité*, in a scintillating and challenging, rather than definitive or acceptable, fashion. English and American critics have approached these questions too, but in nothing like the depth or range or systematic intention of these writers.

As Goldmann has said,

In non-dialectical works, the chapters devoted to theory in sociological and historical studies, and conversely, the chapters devoted to social and historical reality in histories of ideas or of literature and the arts, are treated as extraneous bodies; they are usually inspired by an interest in pure erudition or offered merely in the interest of general information. For the dialectical thinker, however, doctrines form the integrating part of the social reality itself and can be detached from it only by makeshift abstractions; the study of them is an *indispensable* element of the effective study of the problem in the same ways that social and historical reality constitutes one of the most important elements for understanding the spiritual life of an age.¹

It is not necessary to be an avowed dialectical thinker (nor, like Goldmann, to equate this with 'marxist') to be persuaded of the justice of this analysis; the history of ideas appears in our literary criticism, if at all, deplorably impoverished, mechanical, and trivial.

In *Le Dieu caché*, Goldmann stated the problem succinctly:

The methodological problem, as far as the humanities or the science of man is concerned, is principally this: that of dividing the immediately available facts into relative wholes which are sufficiently autonomous to provide a framework for scientific investigation.²

Neither the individual work nor the personality of the author forms a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

sufficiently autonomous whole to provide such a framework, he points out; biography in particular is 'of historical interest only to a *very limited* degree and in an *indirect* way', for whatever clarification it affords of the literary work.³ Yet nearly all of our criticism treats either the individual work or the personality of the author, and when both are attempted, perhaps the most common case, the insufficiency of each merely reinforces the insufficiency of the other. If we move beyond this doubly distorted and poverty-stricken criticism into the history of ideas, Goldmann warns us further that 'none of the traditional fields of university study (law, political history, experimental psychology, sociology, etc.) is concerned with a sufficiently autonomous subject'.⁴

Goldmann's problem, the relation of the whole and its parts, belongs to dialectical thinking, and his perception of it as a problem comes from his adherence to that school; nevertheless, the problem can be solved, for many purposes apart from the strictly philosophical cruces of dialectic itself, more directly and with less apparatus than he himself employs and without resort to the terminology of a particular school. To clarify what is meant for our purposes by the isolation of 'a sufficiently autonomous subject matter', we may cite the successful example offered by Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie*, in which the history of views of madness in the Enlightenment impinges directly on literature and yet belongs genuinely to the subject-matter of both psychology and medicine.⁵ Foucault is enabled by his disentanglement of just this subject-matter to exercise a literary criticism of surpassing interest and originality, and to produce at the same time a critique not simply of outmoded medical theories but of modern psychology at its roots. His subject-matter vividly exemplifies the unsolved antinomy at the centre of Enlightenment thought, the simultaneous existence throughout the period of the aspiration to full and unmitigated rationality and the aspiration to affective or intuitive experience. The isolation of the 'sufficiently autonomous whole', then, implies selection of a subject-matter which cuts across the boundaries of the traditional disciplines, yet which in practice, to be manageable, must be smaller than any traditional discipline; it implies a subject-matter which can be as clearly defined as a discipline, although defined uniquely and for this purpose alone, in order to illuminate the peculiar qualities of the period. It may be helpful to think of this subject-matter as an activity,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

rather than a solid body of knowledge. 'It is not then a question of relating the art to the society, but of studying all the activities and their interrelations, without any concession of priority to any one of them we may choose to abstract.'⁶ The boundaries of such a subject-matter will readily be understood to be elastic; the Biblical criticism which in Coleridge's youth might appear an obscure, difficult, largely foreign scholarly technique confined to a handful of professors of Oriental languages becomes by George Eliot's time the medium of secular religious experience. In the best work of both Goldmann and Foucault, then, the distinction between the 'literary' and the 'other' disciplines which they bring into play effectively disappears; the new relative whole may be judged sufficiently autonomous precisely when this happens. There is no separation between 'background' and literary analysis; the separation, so familiar to us as to seem natural and unavoidable, is the result of arbitrary and conventional and therefore ill-considered selection of subject-matter. It is the result of an inadequate methodology of literary criticism.

Raymond Williams has criticized Continental literary sociology for failing to recognize an ally in the practical criticism of Cambridge. That the insights of Lukács and Goldmann do not get translated into critical practice is an overstatement – one thinks, for example, of Lukács's extended criticism of Thomas Mann, Goldmann's of Pascal – but it is true that their often brilliant literary insights, arrived at through philosophical and social analysis, are usually not worked out in detail or in relation to a particular work. It is tantalizing for those of us whose interest is primarily in literary criticism to have these hard-won insights abandoned at the very moment when their application could begin. Even Foucault, who often uses literary works at the inception or culmination of his analysis, grants us only a few splendid pages on, say, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and then moves on. One would hope that in an expanded conception of 'text', 'theoretical' and 'practical' criticism would be reunited. I have therefore attempted here to conduct my analysis through specific works: Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', Hölderlin's 'Patmos', Browning's 'A Death in the Desert', George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, all of which are marked and shaped by the higher critical movement.

Given that the history of ideas is inseparable from the history of poetry, what 'relative whole' shall we disengage? In one sense, I have

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

deliberately chosen the hardest case: 'Kubla Khan' (and, in the second instance, the odes of Hölderlin), poetry often claimed to be 'pure poetry', poetry of extreme lyricism, emerging unwilling from a consciousness loosed from considerations of rational order, is brought into relation with Biblical criticism, a body of highly technical information and intricate, specialized, restricted practice.

But this is only an apparent opposition. Northrop Frye, in a well-known passage calling for a new literary criticism in our own time, has written,

The absence of any genuinely literary criticism of the Bible in modern times (until very recently) has left an enormous gap in our knowledge of literary symbolism as a whole, a gap which all the new knowledge brought to bear on it is quite incompetent to fill. I feel that historical scholarship is without exception 'lower' or analytic criticism, and that 'higher' criticism would be a quite different activity. The latter seems to me to be a purely literary criticism which would see the Bible, not as the scrapbook of corruptions, glosses, redactions, insertions, confluences, misplacings and misunderstandings revealed by the analytic critic, but as the typological unity which all these things were originally intended to help construct. . . A genuine higher criticism of the Bible, therefore, would be a synthesizing process which would start with the assumption that the Bible is a definitive myth, a single archetypal structure extending from creation to apocalypse.⁷

Frye seems to be unaware of the fact that precisely what he is pleading for was accomplished by the higher criticism from Herder to Strauss; that romantic literary criticism is the higher criticism of literature, and that his own principle,

that in every age of literature there tends to be some kind of central encyclopaedic form, which is normally a scripture or sacred book in the mythical mode, and some 'analogy of revelation'. . . in other modes

is a principle available to him because so much romantic literature adopted and is based upon it.

German thought in this period was seminal for all the romantic movements of Europe; René Wellek has shown the effect of this in literary history, and his views have been extensively corroborated in *'Romantic' and Its Cognates: the European History of a Word*.⁸ The history of Biblical criticism exhibits in a very well-defined way the relations between German and English thought. The local dispute over

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Coleridge's indebtedness pales into insignificance; it is only another proof of Anglo-American parochialism that Coleridge should be fancied to be culpably alone in his dependence on Teutonic speculation. A movement of this significance and scope cannot be reduced to the mechanics (or the moralities) of transmission. The 'collapse of the ontological foundations of religion' (Lukács's phrase) and the consequent reinterpretation of the major religious text of the West is a communal event. It is, of course, also a private event, and proceeds through the inner struggle of individual conscience. 'Influence' embraces both aspects of transmission, public and private. Harold Bloom has characterized the history of English poetry since Milton as an effort of each succeeding poet to grapple with a forebear whom he experienced as greater than himself. Coleridge's sense of subjection to greatness in others was one of many ways in which his sensibility fostered the growth of a genuinely new literary and religious aesthetics in which he himself is a figure of European stature.

The broad scope and great significance of an intellectual movement, however, do not exempt us from knowing the mode of its transmission. The 'archetypal' history favoured by some excellent literary critics is impotent to render the fine shades of experience. M. H. Abrams has written of the importance of the Bible in the period:

The concurrence in topics and design among these very diverse writers was less the result of mutual influence than it was of a common climate of the post-Revolutionary age, and of a grounding in a common body of materials – above all in the Bible, especially as expounded by radical Protestant visionaries, many of whom had assimilated a modicum of Neoplatonic lore.⁹

But it is precisely the common experience of the Bible that was altered in the period, and it was altered through a specific series of works that did indeed become known to very diverse writers in different places (whose experience of the 'post-Revolutionary age' was much more diverse than their experience of revaluations of the Biblical text). The importance of precise knowledge of the critical texts and their diffusion is simply that the mood or tone of an age, as of an individual, is the indirect expression of what questions of truth and falsity are held to be at stake.

Despite the central importance for all of Coleridge's thinking of the nature of religious verity, there is no study of Coleridge's interest in,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

and contribution to, the higher criticism: German histories of the movement do not mention him; English studies tend to assume that the history of the movement in England begins with George Eliot's translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu, Life of Jesus*. The inaccessibility of some of his most interesting work, which still lies concealed in marginalia on German theological works and in his late unpublished notebooks and manuscripts, has doubtless played a part in this neglect. It is certain, however, that his early knowledge of the new criticism was very great, and that it can be clarified by reference to the radical Unitarian circles he moved in during the early 1790s, which were fully aware of the new Continental work and among the first to espouse it without subterfuge; to text-critical work that was largely carried on in Latin rather than German; to translations of such important works as J. D. Michaelis's *Einleitung in das Neue Testament, Introduction to the New Testament*; and to his contacts with Germany through Dr Thomas Beddoes in Bristol. By the time he encountered Eichhorn personally in Göttingen in 1798, he was already an adept. I have by no means essayed a complete investigation of these early contacts; but I hope the notes offer some useful indications of them.

German philosophy has always been known to stand in the immediate background of Coleridge's criticism and even his poetry; yet it has never seemed possible to display the interrelations without appearing to over-systematize, and so to draw further from, rather than nearer to, Coleridge's poetic and critical habits. The higher criticism provides a solution to this perennial problem, for it is an intermediary between philosophy and literary criticism: shaped by philosophical considerations at every step, yet involved in the closest possible analysis of literary texts, it moves back and forth between the two worlds with ease. The Biblical critics in Coleridge's time, most particularly in the 1790s, were engaged in showing that the sacred text belonged to mythology. The new harmonizing of the Bible with other mythologies that emerged from the struggle between the claims of a scientific scholarship and the claims of traditional religion yielded at last a series of vital answers to the question of what system of the supernatural could be made viable in modern poetry. As the Renaissance argument about epic machinery was generalized to all poetry, the relations of epic to other genres altered, new content became available, and the poet was in some sort restored to his office as bard and seer.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Too often Coleridge's religious views, like his philosophical views, have been interpreted with a literalism completely foreign to the higher critical movement. The style of the apologists for Christianity partook of the subtle obliquities of their ironic Enlightenment opponents; often both the critical apologists and the Enlightened sceptics ran the same risk of denunciation by the orthodox. Their arguments were affected by the direction and the tone of the opposition with whom they had more in common than with the unthinking or the zealous traditionalist. As R. P. Blackmur has written,

Those who seem to be the chief writers of our time have found their subjects in attempting to dramatise at once both the culture and the turbulences it was meant to control and in doing so they have had partially to create – as it happens, to recreate – the terms, the very symbolic substance of the culture as they went along.

The apologetical style is a form of romantic irony. The literary perspective opens for us aspects of the higher criticism that have been largely lost sight of, by accident and by design, in the pretensions of the nineteenth century to make of it a 'positive' science and in the attempts of the present century to incorporate its unavoidable results in as bland and a-historical a manner as possible into orthodoxy. The fact that those histories that do exist of the higher criticism and its reception in England come from theological and ecclesiastical circles has ensured the loss of this perspective. Equally, the perspective of critical apologetics since Bayle opens Coleridge's prose style to us; current literary practice, in alienating him from his intellectual milieu, has alienated him from his style. No style exists *per se*.

J. L. Lowes's imposingly wrong-headed book *The Road to Xanadu* has for forty years stood in the way of comprehension of Coleridge's poetry. Lowes's associative theory of the imagination, belied by Coleridge's theory and practice alike, has been rightly dismissed; yet at the same time, illogically, his account of Coleridge's sources and his way of deploying them has been largely accepted and widely imitated. But if his theoretical account of Coleridge's imaginative process is wrong, as it egregiously is, we cannot accept his tale of how the 'hooks-and-eyes' of half-remembered phrases of charmingly exotic old folios arranged themselves into a great poem. We must even doubt that these were his sources. It was Lowes, not Coleridge, whose imagination

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

worked on bits and scraps; perforce: Lowes simply did not do his homework. His jocosely antiquarianism, dismissing as if on principle the immediate intellectual milieu, belongs to what Philippe Sollers has called the 'needle-work class' of literary criticism. We must turn afresh to Coleridge's intellectual biography.

'Kubla Khan' spans Coleridge's early intellectual history, never satisfactorily described. The first influences were of the comfortable Anglicanism that rode unthinking tandem with the dominant Newtonianism of the English eighteenth century; the second were of the more corrosive Enlightenment sort: Coleridge while still at school became an 'infidel sceptic', under the aegis of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*. At the same time, we hear, in Lamb's famous description, he was orating out of Iamblichus. At Cambridge began his Unitarian associations. No man was educated as a 'pre-romantic', that barbarous invention of literary historians. The collocation of Voltaire, and neoplatonism, and Unitarianism, we shall see, makes sense in its true context. The publication of Coleridge's early lectures and sermons and the editing of *The Watchman* have thrown light on the years until 1796; the present work does something to clarify the crisis of 1796-7 in which Coleridge cast off as inadequate the post-Newtonian defences of revealed religion and moved towards an idealist solution.

Goldmann, in expanding Lukács's notion of the tragic vision, deliberately discovered his own method in those of whom he writes: the dialectical element he locates in Kant and reads back to Pascal is for him comfortably at one with his marxist dialectics. I am not altogether persuaded by this as a method of analysis, though it is undeniably enticing as a mode of critical empathy and a way to a unified style. In the present case, the kind of philosophical thinking which lies behind the achievements of Biblical criticism at the beginning of the nineteenth century also forms part of the history of the analysis of 'consciousness' which Lukács and Goldmann have practised; indeed, Feuerbach's critique of religion, treated here as the major influence, with Strauss, on George Eliot, brings us straight to Marx himself.

It becomes evident too that the emergence of a modern form of religious belief within and through the higher criticism is one of the most conspicuous illustrations of the Hegelian conception of 'false consciousness', a study in the meaning of that phrase. Such conceptions can have their full meaning now only within a theory like Lukács's of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29807-0 - 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880

E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

reification or within Sartre's psychoanalytic technique. But the unfolding of this theme in the technical context of the higher critical views of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel should be of interest to those aware of the use of the conception of false consciousness in a variety of modern works, both as an analytic tool and as a literary model. And it is particularly important to see Victorian 'hypocrisy' as inseparable from the history of modernism, Browning and George Eliot from Gide and Brecht. We may see in this, moreover, a source not only of the brilliant reconstructive Protestant theology of the present century, but of all those efforts across a variety of disciplines, including natural science, to view language itself as the sole residence of truth.

Yet this continuity ought, it seems to me, to be a warning and a call to self-analysis rather than an affirmation of the method. In giving the history of our own thought, we must give a critique of our own thought, not a justification of the past in our own terms. I abstain, then, from the unquestioned use of the staple terms of their analysis (including such dilute forms as Raymond Williams's 'structure of feeling'), which raise the ghosts of insoluble dilemmas of particular schools of philosophy.

Foucault again suggests a solution: his critique of modern medical psychology implies his own critical standpoint, but arises directly out of his historical analysis of the origins of modern psychology. In the same way, I would hope, the historical analysis of the roots of modern Biblical criticism is a critique of all 'positive' claims for the objectivity of the interpretation of texts, Biblical or poetic. In this sense, all terms of formal analysis must always be abolished by their very use; and this, rather than an easy continuity of styles, must be the criterion of the autonomy of the created whole.

It may be that consideration of the methods of the textual critics (even in more detail than has been possible here) will serve both to further and to make more precise in new ways the immense expansion of the meaning of 'text' that has been accomplished by semiology. If in our time 'text' has been liberated from 'writing' and become a system of signs, so in that period text was liberated from the letter of divine inspiration and became a system of human significances. That social criticism should be conducted according to the same canons as Biblical criticism would have been congenial to the men of whom we speak in this book, and indeed it was part of their own armoury. 'Le