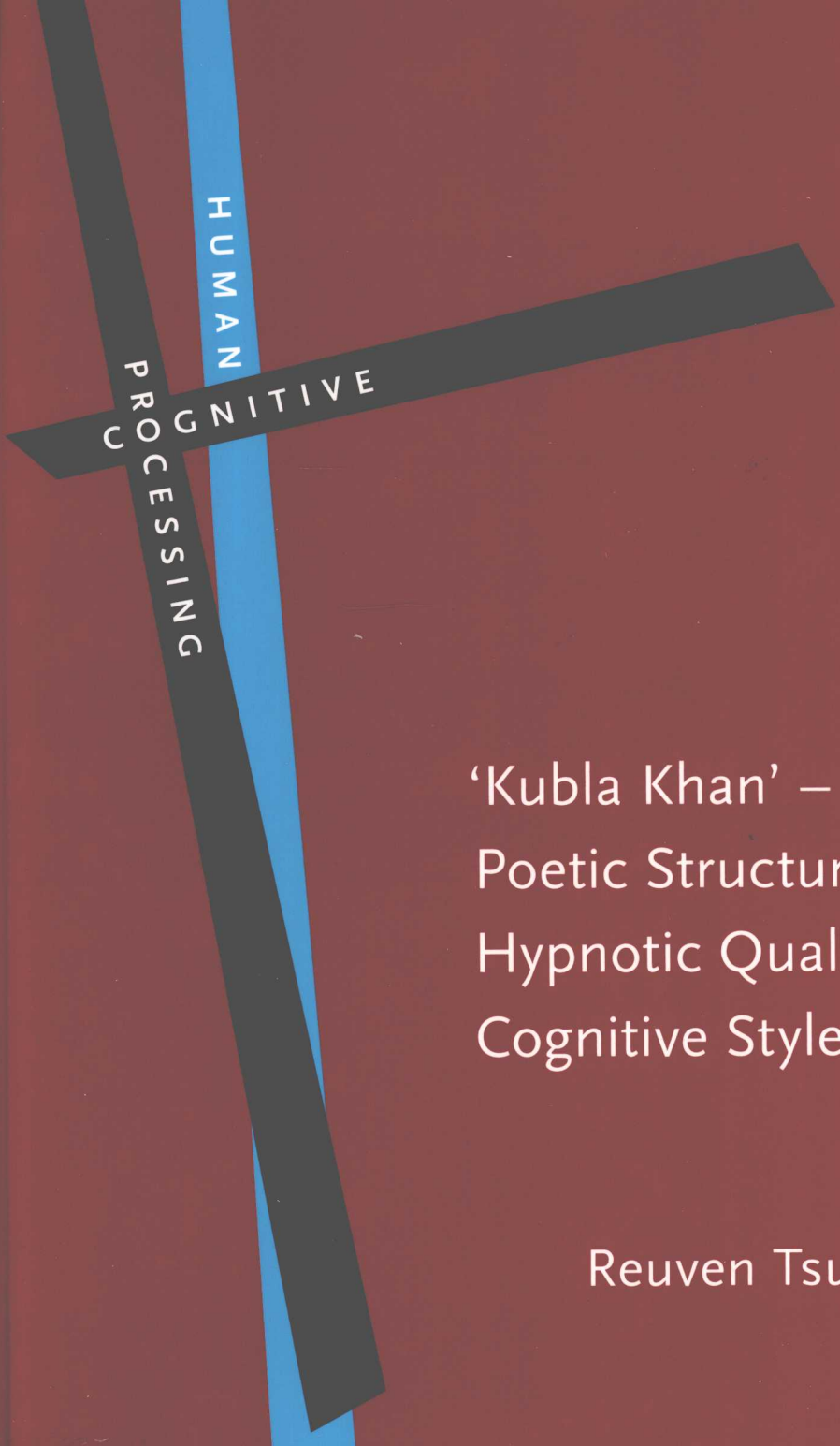

'Kubla Khan' – Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality and Cognitive Style

Reuven Tsur

John Benjamins Publishing Company


30809105

'Kubla Khan'

Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality and Cognitive Style

A study in mental, vocal and critical performance

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Amsterdam/Philadelphia

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tsur, Reuven
'Kubla Khan' - poetic structure, hypnotic quality and cognitive style : a study in mental, vocal and critical performance / Reuven Tsur.
p. cm. (Human Cognitive Processing, ISSN 1387–6724 ; v. 16)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1772–1834. Kubla Khan. 2. Poetics--Psychological aspects. 3. Cognitive styles. I. Tsur, Reuven. II. Series.

PR4480.K83 T78 2006
821/.7--dc22 2005058865
ISBN 90 272 2369 6 (Hb; alk. paper)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

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HUMAN COGNITIVE PROCESSING is a forum for interdisciplinary research on the nature and organization of the cognitive systems and processes involved in speaking and understanding natural language (including sign language), and their relationship to other domains of human cognition, including general conceptual or knowledge systems and processes (the language and thought issue), and other perceptual or behavioral systems such as vision and non-verbal behavior (e.g. gesture). 'Cognition' should be taken broadly, not only including the domain of rationality, but also dimensions such as emotion and the unconscious. The series is open to any type of approach to the above questions (methodologically and theoretically) and to research from any discipline, including (but not restricted to) different branches of psychology, artificial intelligence and computer science, cognitive anthropology, linguistics, philosophy and neuroscience. It takes a special interest in research crossing the boundaries of these disciplines.

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Volume 16

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To the memory of my beloved daughter Inbal
With whom I shared many of my insights

Kubla Khan:

OR, A VISION IN A DREAM. A FRAGMENT.

By Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity [Lord Byron], and, as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits.

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in 'Purchas's Pilgrimage': 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.' The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!

> Then all the charm
> Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair
> Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,
> And each mis-shape[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.

Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him. Σαμερον αδιον ασω[1] [Αὔριον ἄδιον ᾄσω 1834]: but the tomorrow is yet to come. — Coleridge

Kubla Khan

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.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
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.

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

[1] To sing a sweeter song tomorrow.

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prohesying war!
    The shadow of the dome of pleasure
    Floated midway on the waves;
    Where was heard the mingled measure
    From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

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Introduction

This book consists of three closely-related parts, but makes no claim for organic unity. They were written at different stages of my professional career, over a period of twenty years and used different research methods. While in the first and third parts the theory is applied to the same poem ("Kubla Khan"), in the second part it is applied to other texts. Nevertheless, the research in all three parts has been guided by the same aesthetic and cognitive conceptions, illuminating the same issues from different angles. The first part (Chapters 1 and 2) was published in 1987 and discussed three aspects of a complex aesthetic event: "Kubla Khan" as a hypnotic-ecstatic poem, validity in interpretation, and the influence of the critic's cognitive or personality style on his critical decisions in general, and when interpreting "Kubla Khan" in particular. This part is entirely speculative, in the manner prevalent in literary criticism. The other two parts are empirical. The empirical tests in these two parts were conducted within different disciplines, and concern different aspects of the aesthetic event. The second part (Chapter 3) explores gestalt qualities of the text and "reader-response", with methodologies drawn from Gestalt Theory and experimental Cognitive Psychology. The third part (Chapter 4) employs Instrumental Phonetics, submitting four commercially-available vocal performances of "Kubla Khan" by leading British actors to instrumental investigation.

The second part of this book was published in the years 1990-1991, and is based on research conducted with two younger colleagues, then PhD students in Cognitive Psychology and Comparative Literature. We were testing my conceptions of hypnotic poetry and of the reader's decision style. My collaborators contributed the experimental design, and a preoccupation with the personality trait "absorption". This research was guided by hypotheses regarding response to hypnotic poetry in general, and varying rhyme patterns required to account for hypnotic poetry, as expounded in the first part of this book and my later work. It attempted to assess empirically whether people of varying decision styles do indeed respond to pieces of poetry in ways predicted in Chapter 1. Three variables were tested: the effect of text structure, cognitive style, and professional training on reader response. In the first part, psychological hypotheses had been drawn from personality variables consti-

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tuting a wide range of dichotomic scales as expounded by psychologists of perception-and-personality. In the second part we investigated the personality variable "absorption", devised to predict hypnotic susceptibility, and of which I had not been aware at the time of writing Part One. In our empirical study we used a relatively unknown Hebrew poem rather than "Kubla Khan" as our paradigmatic hypnotic poem, because the majority of our experimental subjects were Israeli students, who would have no significant or reliable intuitions concerning an English poem. Had we used native speakers of English they would very likely have been biased by the reputation of this well-known poem.

The idea for the third part grew out of the refereeing process of a projected book consisting of the first two parts of the present book. An anonymous reviewer suggested: "Because so much of the main argument of the book centres on an analysis of prosodic structure (i.e. the claim that Kubla Khan is a hypnotic poem and the proposed justification of that claim, as well as the experimentally studied effects of rhyme patterns on real readers) the discussion could have benefited from more recent work on related issues, such as analysis of the intonation unit and how it can be manipulated to influence the flow of information". Since this suggestion accorded with my current research interests, I was delighted to take up the challenge. However, for reasons to be explained in due course, I decided to investigate actual readings rather than theoretically analyse hypothetical intonation contours, as the reviewer probably meant. Finally, both the first and the third part of this book are concerned with interpretation and interpreters' decision-making. But these are actualised in different modes: abstract metalinguistic discourse in Part One, and concretion of the poem in a vocal performance in Part Three. In the section "Summary and Some Wider Perspectives" of Chapter 4 I make some generalisations, based on the preceding discussion, on how vocal gestures can be perceived as supporting one or another interpretation.

I am re-publishing, then, with minor additions, the two chapters that constituted my 1987 book *The Road to "Kubla Khan"—A Cognitive Approach,* adding a second part reporting an empirical study of reader response. A third part of this book describes an instrumental investigation of recorded readings of "Kubla Khan". It explores how poetic rhythm and emotional qualities are displayed by the human voice. Here, for the first time in my critical career, I am pointing out the vocal resources by which reciters may convey or suppress the hypnotic quality of a poem. The book ends with an Afterword that explores how the findings of the three parts affect or support each other.

Over the years I had little reason to change my views presented in the original book. Yet three important things have changed. First, North Holland Publishers gave me an extraordinary opportunity to present an integrated view of my previous sporadic discussions of cognitive poetics, in my 1992 book *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics.* Thus, this discussion became part of a

more comprehensive theory. Second, I greatly extended the scope of my discussion of hypnotic and ecstatic poetry as part of a wider conception of "poetry and altered states of consciousness": in the afore-mentioned book there is a group of chapters called "Poetry and Altered States of Consciousness". I have also enlarged the corpus: in these chapters additional instances of English hypnotic and ecstatic poems are discussed; and I published a small Hebrew book on Hebrew hypnotic poetry (Tsur, 1988), as well as a Hungarian article on Hungarian hypnotic poetry (Tsur, 1994). In the Hebrew book I explored some additional cognitive devices relevant to hypnotic poetry, among them a detailed study of the gestalt qualities related to rhyme patterns. This I have done through a thought experiment, by systematically manipulating the rhyme pattern of one of Omar Khayyam's Rubáiyáts, then extending the results of the analysis to a twenty-four line long Hebrew poem rhyming on one, "monotonous" sound cluster. Third, in the study reported in the second part of this book we submitted this theoretical analysis of gestalt qualities to an empirical investigation, in a complex experimental set-up. We explored the interaction of three variables: the perceived qualities of rhyme patterns as predicted by gestalt theory, the readers' "absorption" style (a personality trait assessed by a questionnaire developed to predict hypnotic susceptibility), and readers' professional training. The results of this empirical study are presented in the second part of this book (Chapter 3).

As will be seen in Chapter 1 of this book, some critics have been baffled by the multiplicity of interpretations of "Kubla Khan" offered by outstanding critics. I will argue that much (but not all) of this diversity is allowed by the very nature of interpretation as analysed by such analytic philosophers as Morris Weitzand Joseph Margolis; that criticism *cannot* offer a "true" interpretation, only what is "merely possible". This, however, does not mean that "anything goes": within the boundaries of more or less legitimate interpretations there are more plausible and less plausible ones, which can be discussed in a principled manner. Now this poses an interesting problem: as Else Frenkel-Brunswick argued, some personality styles are characterised by an inability to assume an attitude toward the "merely possible". Such an inability is hostile to what might be considered as a legitimate interpretation. The present book propounds one *possible* interpretation: "Kubla Khan" as a romantic nature poem that assumes a hypnotic-ecstatic quality.

The present book adopts Kenneth Burke's notion of "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing co-operation in beings that by nature respond to symbols". Such a formulation brings out the difference between being exposed to a system of signs and being exposed to an electric wire. The former, but not the latter, requires a certain kind of co-operation before a certain kind of effect is produced. What is more, different kinds of co-operation may produce different effects. Many literary critics assume that certain verbal structures *elicit* certain responses in the addressee. The present assumption is that the

responses depend, largely, on the reader's co-operation. Hence the multiplicity of more or less legitimate interpretations to, e.g., "Kubla Khan".

Nor was the poem uniformly welcome as a masterpiece. John Spencer Hillspeaks of a radical change in the critical evaluation of "Kubla Khan":

> Throughout the nineteenth century and during the first quarter of the twentieth century *Kubla Khan* was considered, almost universally, to be a poem in which sound overwhelms sense. With a few exceptions (such as Lamb and Leigh Hunt), Romantic critics—accustomed to poetry of statement and antipathetic to any notion of *ars gratia artis*—summarily dismissed *Kubla Khan* as a meaningless farrago of sonorous phrases beneath the notice of serious criticism. It only demonstrated, according to William Hazlitt, that "Mr. Coleridge can write better nonsense verses than any man in England"—and then he added, proleptically, "It is not a poem, but a musical composition". For Victorian and Early Modern readers, on the other hand, *Kubla Khan* was a poem not below but beyond the reach of criticism, and they adopted (without the irony) Hazlitt's perception that it must properly be appreciated as verbalised music. "When it has been said", wrote Swinburne of *Kubla Khan,* "that such melodies were never heard, such dreams never dreamed, such speech never spoken, the chief thing remains unsaid, and unspeakable. There is a charm upon [this poem] which can only be felt in silent submission of wonder" (Hill, 1983: 93-94).

Some of the nature of this "charm" became better understood when Snyder (1930) put forward his notion of "hypnotic", or "trance-inductive" poetry, which I have further elaborated in the present book. Such poetry tends to direct attention away from the contents to the sound of poetry. The new "Afterword" explores, among other things, the cognitive mechanisms underlying the ability to appreciate hypnotic-ecstatic poems as "verbalised music". In our empirical study we found that low-absorption readers tend to effect poetic closure wherever possible, high-absorptionreaders to leave shapes open. I have speculated that such different inclinations to organise poetic texts into stronger or weaker shapes may crucially affect the perception of the rich precategorial auditory information that conveys the speech sounds: the weaker the shapes, the more active and the more diffuse is the precategorial auditory information. This may be one of several reasons for our finding that low-absorption readers tend to judge hypnotic poems "boring" whereas high-absorption readers find them "interesting". My exploration of this issue relies both on our own experiments and on a wide range of empirical research on speech processing and gestalt qualities conducted by others.

There is a vague suggestion in Hill's account that the different evaluations are somehow determined by the taste of the time. While not denying the possible importance of this temporal element, the present conception is that in this paragraph we are not merely confronted with a string of words that elicits

different verdicts from different readers, guided by a Zeitgeist. My assumption is that the different verdicts are preceded by different kinds of co-operation, different "mental performances" of the string of words on the reader's part. Roughly speaking, Swinburne seems to have realised certain kinds of interaction between various aspects of the sound patterns, as well as between the musical and the other elements of the text; Hazlitt seems to have failed to realise them. Chapter 2 of the present book, "The Texture and Structure of 'Kubla Khan'", will be devoted to a detailed description of the type of structural realisation of the text that is presupposed by the kind of impression reflected in Swinburne's evaluation of the poem. It assumes that one should offer a detailed description of the semantic and prosodic textures of the poem, as well as the overall structure, before going outside the poem for an interpretation. From the metrical point of view, this is one of the most regular poems in the English language. The paper takes up John Crowe Ransom's notion that a fairly predictable metre may dispel anxiety in the presence of ambiguity—give "false security to the Platonic censor in us". Here a distinction is made between *false* and *genuine security,* that result in ecstatic and witty poetry respectively, defining the semantic and prosodic conditions in which security is "false" or "genuine".

Not only Zeitgeist may affect the various kinds of reader co-operation. The present study attempts the principled investigation of another source of influence, what might be called the reader's personality style, or cognitive style; or, to avoid the need to choose between these two options, his "decision style". "Style" in this phrase suggests that decisions made by a reader or a critic are not mere "whims" of his taste, but display some significant (though, perhaps, unintentional) consistency, governed by certain principles if not "rules". In the late nineteen-forties two important symposia were held in which leading psychologists attempted to integrate two domains of psychological studies in which research began independently, but gradually merged into one field of study: perception and personality (Bruner and Kretch eds., 1948; Blake and Ramsey eds., 1951). Their assumption was that one's personality and emotional needs determine, to a large extent, what one perceives. This makes it possible to handle individual differences in perception (and literary interpretation) in a principled manner.

More recently the study of the role of emotions in decision-making received a boost "when the focus of attention shifted from mathematical logic to neuroscience and evolutionary biology: Rather than pursuing the (quixotic) search for ideal rationality, scientists started enquiring how human agents actually took decisions and were surprised to find that emotion was an indispensable part of the process. As recorded in his influential book *Descartes' Error* (1994), the neurologist Antonio Damasio discovered that patients with damage to the orbitofrontal cortex — the part of the brain that deals with the social emotions —were unable to make the simplest of decisions and generally

acted in a decidedly irrational way" (Sutherland, 2001: 81). I began to explore how "the social emotions" affect critical decisions in the mid-nineteen-sixties, long before I was aware of such neuropsychological research. A careful reading of Damasio's book (1994), however, makes it clear that his findings affect my argument mainly on this very general level: rational decisions presuppose proper emotional processes. If you refer to brain centres regarding the quest for certitude in literary response you are, at best, re-stating the problem in neurobiological terms in addition to depth-psychological or social-psychological terms. We need to handle the inhibition of proper emotional (and intellectual) responses not with reference to the suspension of the proper activity of certain brain centres, but to an intolerance for ambiguity or uncertainty. I had discovered this intolerance of ambiguity, as a secondary school teacher, long before I ever heard of Else Frenkel-Brunswick. Certain students resented ambiguity-hunting in poetry, and displayed all sorts of aggressive behaviour when exposed to it. When I reported this at a literature workshop of angry young teachers, educational psychologist Moshe Caspi said "There is a psychological phenomenon called 'Intolerance of Ambiguity'". That is how I was first introduced to the subject. The avoidance of certain emotional responses in such instances need not be traced to the malfunctioning of brain centres responsible for emotional responses, but rather to anxiety aroused by uncertainty.

The theory propounded here concerns a scale of critical attitudes, one end of which I marked as "the quest for certitude", the other as "negative capability", defined by Keats as "the ability to be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason", and "to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts". The present work explores how research on perception and personality can be utilised to account for certain critical decisions concerning poetry. This scale of oppositions based on Keats's definition corresponds to such scales of personality styles (established in twentieth century psychology) as leveling and sharpening, concrete and abstract personality, tolerance and intolerance of ambiguity, open and closed mind, rigidity and flexibility, instrumental and experiential set, high and low absorption, and so forth. Chapter 1, "'Kubla Khan' and the Implied Critic's Decision Style", reviews a wide range of discussions of this poem. It assumes that "Kubla Khan" is a hypnotic-ecstatic poem, and that "hypnotic" and "ecstatic" are qualities that require a high degree of *Negative Capability.* Indeed, as Chapter 3 will demonstrate in a controlled experiment, "high-absorption" respondents are more prone to realise a possible "trance-inductive" quality in a poem than "low-absorption" respondents. I assume that this finding does not concern *only* responsiveness to "trance-inductive" quality in a poem, but, presumably, to poetic qualities in general. However, "trance-inductive" quality at one extreme and the absurd at the other make a greater demand on the reader's Negative Capability than some other qualities. Chapter 1 argues that some of the interpretations of "Kubla Khan" are not as illuminating as could be

because the critics seem to be incapable "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason". It discusses such methodological issues as how one interpretation of a poem may be preferred to another, or the ways in which the application of the various psychological models to a poem may be less or more valid from the aesthetic point of view. At the same time, it also attempts to show how critical decisions may reflect a critic's cognitive strategies, and how these strategies may result in more or less adequate readings.

The fashionable think-aloud experiments may reveal the enormous wealth of a reader's inner world; but this technique is too egalitarian. Not everything a person utters when reading a piece of literature is equally relevant to its realisation. Think-aloud experiments assume that whatever the reader utters *a propos* a piece of literature is of the greatest importance. Such an approach fails to distinguish between the reader's idiosyncratic responses and those responses that reflect his underlying structural knowledge. The approach propounded here, by contrast, gives a minute description of poetic structures. This makes it possible to grade readers' responses according to the degree to which they reflect structural knowledge. At the same time, it systematically explores the (implied) reader's or critic's decision style, and offers a psychological theory that may account for the preference for responses that reflect more or less of one's underlying structural knowledge; and also for the various ways of handling such structural knowledge. This is not merely a matter of professional training. It is governed to a considerable degree by personality style. As reported in Chapter 3, we have found that high- and low-absorption readers with similar high academic qualifications in literature may respond in systematically different ways to the same poetic texts.

One of the crucial terms used by New Criticism is "ambiguity". One of the personality variables introduced by Else Frenkel-Brunswick into the study of perception and personality is "intolerance of ambiguity". This would lead one to expect that readers and critics may deploy strategies to avoid certain crucial aspects of aesthetic structure. Thus some responses to a piece of literature may be less adequate than others. Cognitive poetics assumes that response to poetry exploits adaptive devices turned to aesthetic ends. Psychologists claim that certain personality styles tend to be maladaptive in extra-literary reality. Chapter 1 of this book argues at length that the same strategies may be maladaptive also in responding to stimuli consisting of verbal structures. In the second part of this book we have empirically assessed one personality variable in real readers. When reading a piece of literary criticism, however, the meta-critic usually doesn't have access to the empirical critic's personality style. But sometimes we may notice that in a piece of criticism certain cognitive strategies characteristic of certain personality or cognitive styles are consistently deployed. This indicates "the implied critic's decision style", which need not necessarily conform with the flesh-and-blood critic's personality style as-

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