Kubla Khan

by Elisabeth Schneider

However much it owes to Milton, Coleridge's poem has its own quite un-Miltonic individual identity of music. A particular tone is given to the whole by a predominance of *æ-* and other modified *a*-sounds that set the poem distinctly apart from any music characteristic of Milton. The sound is common in Eastern names, particularly as anglicized in Coleridge's day, and is very noticeable in *Thalaba,* where, besides the hero's own name and the staples Allah, Mohammed, Arabia, Bagdad, Babylon, Ali, the stanzas are dotted with Lobaba, Abdaldar, Dom-Daniel, Okba, Nayd, Moath, Saleah, Haruth and Maruth, Al-Maimon, Aloadin, Mohareb, Zohak, Ararat, Laila, Bahar-Danush. These names spring out from the pages as one turns them quickly, and their number might easily be doubled. Southey was conscious of their prominence and attempted, like Coleridge, to play his tune upon them. So his maiden is usually a "*da*msel" and she plucks fruit from the "*ta*marind" tree. "*Ca*mels" and "*ca*verns" and "*Pa*radise" and "*ma*gic" follow as automatically as a string of beads, often like a reflex motion of the voice when the mind has gone off elsewhere.

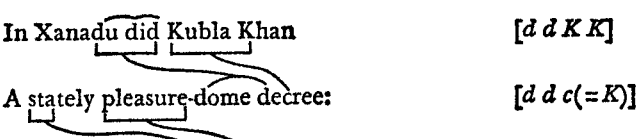
The pattern of *Kubla Khan,* however, is not confined to the *æ*-sounds. The rhyme, with all its freedom, its shiftings and *Lycidas*-like "oscillations," has elaborate hidden correspondences. The rhyme scheme of the opening seven lines, for example, is exactly repeated in the first seven lines of the second paragraph. The extraordinary elaboration, also, of the assonance keeps the music of this poem fresh through many re-readings. Even when one knows it well, it is still full of half-caught echoes, correspondences of sound felt but too complex to be anticipated or to remain tabulated in the mind even after they have been analyzed. And so they retain a subtle, secret harmony.

The most obvious of the patterns in the opening lines, apart from the ubiquity of the *a*-sounds, is the alliteration that closes each of the first five lines: "*Kubla Khan*," "*d*ome *d*ecree," "*r*iver *r*an," "*m*easureless to *m*an," "*s*unless *s*ea"—a revival of the device Coleridge had practiced so conspicuously in his Spenserian-Miltonic verse of 1795. Here, however, it is only a small part of his effect and is so well subordinated to the whole pattern that one might know the poem for a long time without becoming conscious of the obvious and somewhat mechanical device.

The opening line, "In Xa'nadu' did Ku'bla Kha'n," receives its primary shape from the inclosed assonance of its four stresses, *a-u-u-a*, which swings the sound as if in a shallow curve, the symmetry being still further marked by the full rhyme of the inclosing syllables, *Xan-* and *Khan* (Coleridge undoubtedly pronounced *Khan* as it was often spelled, *Can*) and the embellishment of minor echoes, *d*'s and short *i*'s binding together the first part and *k*'s the end of the line:

Two of the next three lines are given the same outer shape by means of the same inclosing assonance, "Alph . . . ran" and "caverns . . . man"; but the extremely symmetrical swing of the first line is broken and varied afterwards.

In the first four lines only one sound stands out alone, without an echo; it is the most resounding syllable in the poem—*dome*. The word resounds naturally of itself, but its intrinsic length and weight are here increased by its isolation and its contrast against the background of the lighter vowel sounds that precede it:



The *dome* stands alone, though it is tied into the verse by its focusing of the *d*-sounds before and after. In contrast with the self-contained symmetry of the first line, the second has a freewheeling sound, for it has little internal pattern to give it a shape of its own beyond the inflectional shape determined by its meaning. Its sounds, all but *dome,* dissolve into the general fabric. The closing word, *decree,* unites in its two chief consonants the two minor alliterations of the first line, the *d*'s ("-du did") and the *k*'s ("Ku- Kha-"). *Stately* disappears into *sacred* in the next line, and *pleasure* has its full double rhyme in *measure* in the line after. This absorption of the other elements of the line lends still greater prominence to *dome.*

The tune and variations to be played upon the *æ*-sound are established by the first sentence, in which three of the five lines begin and end with stresses upon it. But this effect is overlaid or interwoven with an elaboration so intricate that one could scarcely point to its mate in English poetry if we except the more subtle harmonies of Milton and Bridges. It would be both useless and impertinent, however, to point out in detail the almost innumerable linkings of sound in *Kubla Khan.* Anyone can do it for himself who cares to, though the maziness of the design is remarkable. After the initial sentence the pattern becomes more flexible and varied. The *æ*-sounds recur, but less regularly, and often lengthen or shade into the broader *a*'s. Exactly what sounds Coleridge thought or heard when he wrote *enchanted, haunted, chaffy,* and *dance* we do not know, but it is probable that he heard at least some of them equivocally as both *hænted* and *hānted,* like the variegated *a*'s of the Eastern names. Often throughout the poem he repeats his old device of foreshadowing the terminal rhyme by a preceding echo of assonance or alliteration—"sinuous rills," "chasm which slanted," "ceaseless turmoil seething," "mazy motion," "river ran," and "measureless to man" each used a second time, "from far," "mingled measure," "loud and long." This device, used skilfully as it is here and partly concealed by the interlacing of other patterns, contributes something to the floating effect of the whole, for the assonance softens the impact of the rhyme and so lessens its tendency to bring the line to earth at the close: the terminal rhyme does not settle so heavily upon the mind when its emphasis has been partly stolen by its preceding shadow. The forward movement is made to pause and "oscillate" further at times by the considerable number of lines in which the meaning looks forward while the rhyme looks back. One finds this often elsewhere as the closed couplet of the eighteenth century broke down, but it seems to be used in *Kubla Khan* with a somewhat special effect.

To my mind, none of this bears the marks of dream-composition,

though it has cooperated with Coleridge's story of a dream by contributing to the floating effect. It does not sound, either, like any other sort of fully automatic composition. The intense concentration of the act of composing does indeed bear some likeness to reverie; it is, in fact, reverie in one of Erasmus Darwin's senses, "the poet's reverie" in which the will is active though attention is detached from the outside world. But it is creative *will* that is at work and not the *wish*-fulfillment reverie of certain psychologico-aesthetic theories. That will is felt in *Kubla Khan,* I think, even though its aim may be only vaguely determined.

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I sometimes think we overwork Coleridge's idea of "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities." I have to come back to it here, however, for the particular flavor of *Kubla Khan,* with its air of mystery, is describable in part through that convenient phrase. Yet the "reconciliation" does not quite occur either. It is in fact avoided. What we have instead is the very spirit of "oscillation" itself. One could scarcely find words better than those Coleridge used of *Lycidas,* "the floating or oscillation of assonance and consonance," to describe the effect not of the terminal rhymes alone but of the whole sound pattern of *Kubla Khan* and, beyond that, of its imagery, its movement, and, in the end, even its meaning. The poem is the soul of ambivalence, oscillation's very self; and that is probably its deepest meaning. In creating this effect, form and matter are intricately woven. The irregular and inexact rhymes and the varied lengths of the lines play some part. More important is the musical effect in which a smooth, rather swift forward movement is emphasized by the relation of grammatical structure to line and rhyme, yet is impeded and thrown back upon itself even from the beginning by the *æ*-inclosed line units. Like the Mariner's ship at the Equator, the verse moves "backwards and forwards half her length," or like tides rocking in a basin. In the middle of the poem the slightly stronger forward movement loses itself altogether in the floating equivocation between backward-turned trochaic and forward-leaning iambic movement. One hears the texture of Milton, whose great will and drive, even in his discursive moments, gives to all he wrote an air of power and singleness of direction, however elaborate and circuitous his form may be. But in *Kubla Khan* one hears this elaboration almost wholly deprived of such will or with only enough will to keep it afloat. Its spirit is "to care and not to care," but not in Mr. Eliot's sense.

In this forward-flowing movement counterpointed against a stationary-oscillating one, form and meaning are almost indistinguishable. The

pleasure-dome is built, then it is unbuilt. The poem is about Kubla, then it is not about him. The oppositions of image are not only the obvious ones of light and darkness, sunny dome and sunless sea or caves of ice, Paradise garden and hints of hell. In the elaborate opening passage *stately, dome, decree, sacred, caverns, measureless,* and *sunless* are all rather solemn words and, except for *stately,* not cheerful-solemn but awful-solemn. Yet the dome is a pleasure-palace; the movement and music of the verse are light rather than solemn. The central statement, through the first half of the poem, is one of bright affirmation. The talk and activity are of building, the pleasure-dome and a delightful Paradise materialize. But even as the words give they take away with half-Miltonic negatives. *Pleasure* itself is rhymed with one of them—*measureless;* deprivation haunts the language. The negations recur in *sunless, ceaseless, lifeless,* a second *measureless.* The demon-lover is not in Paradise; he is an *as-if* brought in to cast his shadow. Images of awe and mystery underlie Paradise in the subterranean river and ocean, and the ancestral threat of war is heard far off. The whole poem oscillates between giving and taking away, bright affirmation and sunless negation, light flowing music that nevertheless stands still and rings the portentous sound of *dome* time after time.

The spirit of the poem, moreover, is cool and rather non-human. One feels no real warmth even in the sunny garden. And though the verse is nominally well peopled, Kubla, the wailing woman, and the Abyssinian maid are not really there, and their half-presence leaves the place less human than if the theme were a poetic scene of nature alone. Even the poet, who is half-present in the end, is dehumanized behind his mask of hair and eyes and magic circle and is only present as mirrored in the exclamations of nebulous beholders—or rather, he *would* be mirrored *if* he had built his dome and *if* there had been beholders. Nor is there any human or personal feeling in the poem; the poet's "deep delight," impersonal enough even if it were there, exists only to be denied.

Here in these interwoven oscillations dwells the magic, the "dream," and the air of mysterious meaning of *Kubla Khan.* I question whether this effect was all deliberately thought out by Coleridge, though it might have been. It is possibly half-inherent in his subject. Paradise is usually lost and always threatened, in Genesis and Milton, in the Paradise gardens of Irem, of Aloadin, of Abyssinian princes. The historical Cubla did not apparently lose his in the end, but it too was threatened with war and dissension and portents. The Paradise of Coleridge's poem was not exactly lost either. What was lost, the closing lines tell us, was the

vision of an unbuilt Paradise, an unwritten poem. His Paradise in that sense was truly enough a dream. What remains is the spirit of "oscillation," perfectly poeticized, and possibly ironically commemorative of the author.

COLERIDGE

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