

Nonsense and Sound in Coleridge's Table Talk and 'Kubla Khan'

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WILLIAM HAZLITT BEGINS HIS ESSAY on 'Mr. Coleridge' by declaring that "The present is an age of talkers, and not of doers", with Coleridge being 'the most impressive talker of his age'.¹ Hazlitt was indeed of the opinion that too much talking came at the cost of doing, preventing Coleridge from becoming 'the finest writer' of his age. Too many hours melted in listless talk also led, Hazlitt thought, to a discrepancy between Coleridge's table talk, and his poetry and prose: 'If our author's poetry is inferior to his conversation, his prose is utterly abortive'.²

In this paper, I argue that contemporary reactions to Coleridge's conversation and critics' reactions to 'Kubla Khan: or, a Vision in a Dream' are similar in content and language. The puzzlement of listeners and readers alike will not be seen as coincidental, but rather as hinting at a way of thinking exhibited in talk and poem. Indeed, both reflect an overall intellectual tendency towards complexity that Coleridge's contemporaries—and even Coleridge himself—identified. I will argue, moreover, that sound, important in both spheres, is productive of the tension in the poem between Kubla's and Coleridge's ability to achieve their respective visions as well.

Diversionary Tactics: Coleridge's Listeners

Hazlitt was not alone in his judgement of Coleridge's talk. In the years Coleridge was living at Highgate, people would often flock to the Gillman home to hear him speak, as Philarète Chasles describes:³

We arrived at eight at the small but elegant residence of Coleridge; about thirty persons were already assembled in a small blue room, simply furnished. Coleridge was discoursing. Standing in front of the chimney upon which he leaned back, with head erect and arms crossed, his dreamy eyes lost in abstractions, transported by the inspirations of his own genius, he seemed to be addressing, not the auditors, but replying to his own

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² William Hazlitt, 'Mr. Coleridge', in *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits* (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), 61, 64, 75. Carl Woodring notes that 'Basil Willey's explanation for the superiority of C's conversation to commissioned composition contrasts sharply with Hazlitt's: "... to be at his best his mind must be in action and growth, and his feelings ardent as he composes. Thus he shines most of all in conversation, where he can range freely and follow the scent wherever it leads; next best, in marginal annotations, in notebooks and in letters, where formal arrangement is not expected. Least of all in set composition, where the requirements of order and strict progression freeze the genial current, and often inhibit him altogether"' (*TTI* xxxix n. 7).

³ Coleridge moved to Highgate Hill to live with Anne and James Gillman in 1816. As Woodring details: 'friends began to bring visitors there, increasingly on Thursday evenings until those evenings became an open house to friends and institutionalised as a "class" in 1822, with few interruptions until 1829, when Coleridge wrote to Allsop of "our former Thursday Evening *Conver-* or to mint a more appropriate term, *Oneversazioni*"' (*TTI* lv).

thoughts. His voice was vibratory, rich and full, his features harmonious, his ample brow, shaded by dark brown curls, in which here and there some silver lines intruded, the beautiful contour of his mouth, sweet in expression, also the softness of his expressive eyes, won favour unheard. (*TTI* lvi)

Chasles gives an account of the residence, the small blue room, the size of the audience, as well as a detailed portrayal of how Coleridge looked and sounded as he discoursed. It is worth noting, however, what Chasles left out. Despite having gone to the Gillmans' specifically to hear Coleridge speak, Chasles does not dedicate a single word to the contents he listened to.⁴

Describing the scene and the talker in lieu of the talk was just one of the diversionary tactics used by Coleridge's contemporaries. The use of metaphors was another. River-like metaphors were a favourite, as Seamus Perry notes, with contemporaries frequently recurring to them in an effort to describe Coleridge's talk:⁵ Wordsworth thought that the image of a 'majestic river' was the 'liveliest and truest [. . .] he could give of Coleridge's talk'; Bryan Waller Proctor compares Coleridge's talk to the 'Rhine [. . .] [t]hat exulting and abounding river';⁶ and another listener thought that Coleridge's monologues resembled a 'stream [that] flowed on and began to widen'.⁷

Music, as Seamus Perry explains, was another crowd favourite.⁸ Charles Cowden Clarke mentions Coleridge's 'elevated tone, as he rolled forth his gorgeous sentences, his lofty look, his sustained flow of language, his sublime utterance' which, he thought, 'gave the effect of some magnificent organ-peal to our entranced ears'. Thomas Hood describes Coleridge's 'fine, flowing voice' as 'glorious music'; Charles Lamb reports that 'the musical words flowed in an unbroken stream from his lips'; and John Abraham Heraud thinks Coleridge's 'utterance' is "'far above singing," beautiful as music'.⁹

Listeners were not only distracted by the musicality of Coleridge's delivery, they were also left to grapple with topics they knew little about. What Thomas Colley Grattan experienced in 1832 when Coleridge spoke about the theory of colours was more likely the rule than the exception: 'He was no doubt familiarly acquainted with Goethe's doctrine or theory of colours, and probably with an Italian translation of Aristotle's treatise, which neither I nor any of his listeners had more than passingly heard of' (*TTI* 566). Or, as Hazlitt puts it: 'C[oleridge] is the only person who can talk to all sorts of people, on all sorts

⁴ When Chasles did attempt a description of the contents, namely of Coleridge's ideas 'of the dynamic philosophy', Woodring observes that he 'partly grasped but oversimplified' them (*TTI* 555).

⁵ Seamus Perry, 'The Talker', in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn 103–25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 107.

⁶ Quoted in R. W. Armour and R. F. Howes, *Coleridge the Talker: A Series of Contemporary Descriptions and Comments, with a Critical Introduction* (New York and London: Cornell University Press and Oxford University Press, 1940), 379, 317.

⁷ Quoted in Perry, 'The Talker', 107.

⁸ Perry, 'The Talker', 106.

⁹ Quoted in Armour and Howes, *Coleridge the Talker*, 135–36, 265, 280, 261.

of subjects, without caring a farthing for their understanding of one word he says'.¹⁰

Another issue contemporaries repeatedly struggled with was the number of topics Coleridge managed to raise in conversation. The letter that Keats wrote upon first meeting Coleridge showcases what seems to have been the usual ratio of subjects per mile:

In those two Miles he broached a thousand things—let me see if I can give you a list—Nightingales, Poetry—on Poetical sensation—Metaphysics—Different genera and species of Dreams—Nightmare—a dream accompanied by a sense of touch—single and double touch—A dream related—First and second consciousness—the difference explained between will and Volition—so m[an]y metaphysicians from a want of smoking the second consciousness—Monsters—the Kraken—Mermaids—southey believes in them—southeys belief too much diluted—A Ghost story—Good morning—I heard his voice as he came towards me—I heard it as he moved away . . . Good Night!¹¹

One could think that Keats was exaggerating, but this list resembles some of the expansive headings of Woodring's edition of Coleridge's *Table Talk*. At a dinner party at John's on 27 April 1823, Coleridge reportedly spoke about Kean, the difference between Mackintosh and Davy, whilst also referring to Robert Smith. The topic of politics then came up, and Canning and Lord Liverpool were mentioned. National debt and poor laws were discussed, the conduct of the Whigs from the time of the French Revolution, his views on the Spanish, on the votes given for Reform, the adherents of the Romish Church, Milton's Latin Style, the literal interpretation of the Bible—and the list goes on (*TT* I 39–52). Unable to remain 'Content with half knowledge', as Keats once wrote of him, Coleridge produced not only long-winded monologues, but also winding monologues.¹² Wordsworth, in fact, reportedly said that 'the liveliest and truest image he could give of Coleridge's talk' was that of a 'majestic river', and the full quotation is now relevant:

¹⁰ William Hazlitt, 'On the Conversation of Authors', in *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men, and Things* (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), I 74 (51–75). The depth of Coleridge's table talk was often commented upon by his contemporaries: at a 'midnight supper, Coleridge burst out like a conflagration. [. . .] he took up a prawn, and from that diminutive text preached upon the flux and reflux of the ocean, the wild theory of St. Pierre, the immensity of the leviathan, and the magnificence of the great deep. Had we supped with a whale entire, he could not have done more with his subject'. Coleridge's conversation, however, does not always come across quite in the same way in the *Table Talk*. The brevity of the entries and the topics contained in them nevertheless seems to be an issue of the amanuenses, rather than a characteristic of the talker. Indeed, there are many examples of Coleridge's amanuenses not being able to keep up, as when John Taylor Coleridge remarked that 'it is impossible to carry off or commit to paper his long trains of argument, indeed it is not always possible to understand them, he lays the foundation so deep and views every question in so original a manner'. Soon after, when attempting to record what been said, he added: 'We fell upon ghosts' (*TT* I 16). Similarly, Henry Taylor Coleridge's remark that 'My uncle dined at John's. He talked very fluently and intelligibly. I never heard him to more advantage' suggests that there were other times when he did not hear him to all advantage (*TT* I 39).

¹¹ 'To George and Georgiana Keats', in *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–21*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1958), II (1819–21), 88–89.

¹² 'To George and Tom Keats', in *The Letters of John Keats, I* (1814–18), 194.

the sound of or sight of whose course you caught at intervals, which was sometimes concealed by forests, sometimes lost in sand, then came flashing out loud and distinct, then again took a turn which your eye could not follow, yet you knew and felt that it was the same river [. . .] there was always a connection between its parts in his own mind, though not one always perceptible to the minds of others.¹³

Wordsworth's description of the uneven way in which listeners were able to grasp the continuous flow of Coleridge's thoughts resembles, in turn, the description Coleridge makes of 'the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking' in *Biographia Literaria*:

Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed, how the little animal *wins* its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and of passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary *fulcrum* for a further propulsion. (BL I 124)

The picture of a small water-insect winning 'its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and of passive motion' represents the uneven logical movement of the act of thinking. Thoughts, like the water-insect, do not move linearly, but rather yield to the current before moving forward. The experience of following Coleridge's talk, according to Wordsworth, was thus also necessarily winding, as implied by: 'sometimes concealed [. . .] then came flashing loud and distinct'.

Wordsworth's description of Coleridge's talk not only mentions the river-like long-windedness implied in Keats's list, but also blames any misunderstanding of the connections between the parts on Coleridge's average listener. De Quincey similarly blamed Coleridge's listeners, rather than his logic:

Long before the coming-round commenced, most people had lost him, and naturally enough supposed that he had lost himself. They continued to admire the separate beauty of the thoughts, but did not see their relationships to the dominant theme.¹⁴

De Quincey believes, like Wordsworth, that there was a logic to the sequence, albeit not apparent to all who heard it. Coleridge himself acknowledged that he was at fault. On the one hand, Coleridge admits that it could be hard to keep

¹³ Quoted in Armour and Howes, *Coleridge the Talker*, 379–80.

¹⁴ Quoted in Perry, 'The Talker', 122. For an account of the importance of circularity in Coleridge's imagination see Thomas Owens, 'Orrery Imaginings', in *Wordsworth, Coleridge, and 'the language of the heavens'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 119–46.

up with the relationships between the separate thoughts and the main theme: 'I skip from one thing to another too fast and unconnectedly' (*TT* I 146). On the other hand, Coleridge recognises that his mind ran on too many subjects (or toads) per mile:

I envy dear Southey's power of saying one thing at a time, in short and close sentences, whereas my thoughts bustle along like a Surinam toad, with little toads sprouting out of back, side, and belly, vegetating while it crawls.¹⁵

Although Coleridge's table talk, with its long-windedness and its little toads, was commonly faced with incomprehension, it does not mean, as his friends recognized, that it was incomprehensible.

The distracting melodiousness of Coleridge's voice, the length of his monologues, the lack of links between subjects, not to mention the complexity and variety of topics left Coleridge's listeners wondering, like Thomas Carlyle, whether it was more than 'a confused unintelligible flood of utterance'.¹⁶ Fascinated by Coleridge's erudition and eloquence, but unable to understand what had been said, listeners felt, as Thomas Hood put it, 'giddy and dazzled, but not displeased'.¹⁷ Listening to Coleridge, it seems, was like an oracular experience, but one without intellectual gains. As Carlyle described it: 'you listen as if to an oracle, and find yourself no jot the wiser'.¹⁸ Unable to 'remember the train afterward', as John Taylor Coleridge put it, Coleridge's dazzled listeners resorted to descriptions of the musicality of Coleridge's voice, the room he was in, or even the oracle's physical appearance.¹⁹ The bravest, like Keats, attempted to contain the breadth of Coleridge's river-like knowledge into long lists of subjects whose connection only seemed apparent in Coleridge's head.

Diversionary Tactics: Coleridge's Readers

Critics' reactions to Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' were no more enlightening than the descriptions of Coleridge's table talk. Published in May 1816, the slim octavo entitled *Christabel: Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep* rapidly went through three editions.²⁰ J. R. de J. Jackson blames both the changes 'in the manners of reviewing' and Coleridge's shifting political views for the harsh

¹⁵ Quoted in Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence*, ed. Thomas Sadler (London: Macmillan, 1869), 217–18.

¹⁶ *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. Henry Duff Traill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), XI 55–56. Although Thomas Carlyle's account is not particularly complimentary, the idea of not understanding Coleridge is frequent among Coleridge's more willing listeners, as suggested.

¹⁷ Armour and Howes, *Coleridge the Talker*, 265.

¹⁸ 'TC to Thomas Murray' (24 August 1824), in *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, gen. ed. Charles Richards Sanders (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1970), III 139.

¹⁹ See the entry from June 1825 by Lord Bernard Coleridge, 'Diary of John Taylor Coleridge', in *This for Remembrance* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1925), 40.

²⁰ For additional details regarding publishing history, see William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 594.

critical reception the pamphlet received.²¹ A review attributed to Thomas Moore, for example, considered the collection ‘one of the boldest experiments that has yet been made on the patience or understanding of the public’ (*CH* I 234). Yet, I will argue, there seems to be a less contextual issue at play, namely, one of complexity.

Whereas the pamphlet’s ‘Preface’ strove to ascertain the originality of ‘Christabel’, the introductory note titled ‘Of the Fragment of Kubla Khan’ did not strive to ascertain much:

The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity, 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.²²

This is not a particularly laudatory description. Not only does Coleridge emphasise that ‘Kubla Khan’ is a ‘Fragment’, but also he admits to only having published it at the advice of another poet. Byron is nonetheless left unnamed, and the merits he saw, in Coleridge’s view, are not real, but ‘supposed’. What is more, Coleridge regarded ‘Kubla Khan’ as a mere ‘psychological curiosity’. Moreover, by the third edition the volume was titled *Christabel, &c.*, thus highlighting the relative importance Coleridge attributed to ‘Christabel’ from the collection’s cover.

It is thus unsurprising that the first readers of ‘Kubla Khan’ were influenced by the prefatory note. An anonymous reviewer, after dedicating five pages to the ‘narrative’ of ‘Christabel’, devoted less than a line to ‘Kubla Khan’, illuminatingly declaring it ‘one of those pieces that can only speak for itself’ (*CH* I 205). Others briefly described it as ‘wild and fanciful’ (*CH* II 280); ‘below criticism’ (*CH* II 246); and unworthy of a ‘detailed account’ (*CH* II 260). Convinced that the poem was meaningless, critics thought it undeserving of a meaningful review.

The use of other diversionary tactics, however, betrays a larger problem of incomprehension. As a matter of fact, when more detailed reviews of ‘Kubla Khan’ were attempted, reviewers often mostly or completely centred on its introductory note.²³ And is not describing the introduction of a poem, rather than the poem, comparable to describing the room Coleridge was in, rather than the talk?

²¹ See *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 1968), I (1794–1834), 9 (hereafter *CH*, followed by volume number).

²² Coleridge, *Christabel &c.*, third ed. (London: John Murray, 1816), v, 51. The famous introductory note was only added to the published versions of ‘Kubla Khan’. The Crewe holograph manuscript (British Library, MS 50847), had a shorter endnote instead, which read: ‘This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797’. There is no reference to ‘Purchas’s Pilgrimage’, nor to any ‘person on business from Porlock’ in the early version. The expansion and new placement of the note rank it differently, add complexity, and influence one’s reading from the beginning.

²³ See, for example, Unsigned Review, *Literary Panorama* (*CH* I 215); Josiah Conder, *Eclectic Review* (*CH* I 212); and Thomas Moore, *Edinburgh Review* (*CH* I 233).

Furthermore, the poem's first critics, like many of Coleridge's listeners, focused on its musicality. For a long time, in fact, 'Kubla Khan' was considered, 'almost universally', as Reuven Tsur observed, 'to be a poem in which sound overwhelms sense'.²⁴ William Hazlitt famously saw 'Kubla Khan' as proof that 'Mr. Coleridge can write better *nonsense* verses than any man in England. It is not a poem, but a musical composition' (*CH* I 208). Leigh Hunt thought that the verses 'A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw: / It was an Abyssinian maid, / And on her dulcimer she play'd, / Singing of Mount Abora' were 'but one note of music ever sweet, yet never cloying';²⁵ John Bowring likewise described the poem as 'perfect music' (*CH* I 550); and Henry Nelson Coleridge, referring to the conclusion of 'Kubla Khan', wrote that

not only the lines by themselves are musical, but the whole passage sounds all at once as an outburst or crash of harps in the still air of autumn. The verses seem as if *played* to the ear upon some unseen instrument. (*CH* I 627)

Coleridge's readers, as with his listeners, repeatedly evaded content. Both seem, in fact, to have experienced the same as Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, after reading the poem 'Jabberwocky': 'it seems very pretty [. . .] but it's *rather* hard to understand!'.²⁶

Coleridge's Vision, Coleridge's Talk

I now wish to argue that the critics' reactions to 'Kubla Khan' might have been due to similar issues that Coleridge's listeners endured, namely a lack of links between thoughts, the number of allusions and images, and even the poem's distracting musicality. Although contemporaries referred to 'Kubla Khan' as musical nonsense, making sense of the various musical references and echoes in the poem may, ironically, be helpful to understand its underlying logic.²⁷

'Kubla Khan' showcases, from the first stanza, what John Beer saw as 'the chief characteristic of the poem', namely, 'its extraordinary compression'.²⁸

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;

²⁴ Reuven Tsur, 'Kubla Khan'—*Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality and Cognitive Style* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006), 4.

²⁵ Leigh Hunt, *Imagination and Fancy; or Selections from the Best English Poets* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1844), 279.

²⁶ See Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. Martin Gardner (London: Penguin, 2001), 156.

²⁷ Olivia Reilly and Ewan James Jones have looked at the role that sound plays in the poem, but from a prosodic viewpoint in "[A]nother and yet the same": Rhyme's Music in Kubla Khan, *Romanticism* 23.2 (2017), 145–54; and "The Sonic Organization of 'Kubla Khan'", *SiR* 57 (2018), 243–64, respectively.

²⁸ J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), 276.

And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills
 Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree;
 And here were forests ancient as the hills,
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. (*PW* I.1 512–13)

The first readers of the poem might have struggled with the stanza's many allusions—a problem familiar to Coleridge's listeners, who often dealt with little Surinam toads bustling along—but the fact that the tyrant Kubla ordered a palace (or a 'pleasure-dome') to be built should have been clear, at any rate.²⁹ Like all paradises, it is idyllic, with its river, Alph, running 'through caverns measureless to man'. Indeed, that Kubla's paradise is enclosed is also to be expected.³⁰ This 'vision' is emphatically 'girdled round' with 'walls' and 'towers'. The sense of encasement is further highlighted by the sinuosity of the rills, as well as by the 'greenery' that enfolds it. It is worth noting the tension this generates: between the description of the caverns as 'measureless to man' and the finite 'pleasure-dome' Kubla aims to build. Trying to contain the immeasurable within walls is, in fact, one of the first signs that the vision was unachievable—and as difficult a task, perhaps, as trying to contain Coleridge's seemingly measureless talk in writing.³¹ John Taylor Coleridge failed to do so when he recorded that, after a disquisition on 'the state of affairs in Portugal', his uncle's thoughts bustled along elsewhere: 'We then got, I know not how, to German topics' (*TTI* 5).

The adversative that opens the second stanza ('But oh') prophesies a departure from the orderly paradise of the first:

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:

²⁹ John Livingston Lowes' study, which points to the existence of an astonishing number of allusions in 'Kubla Khan' alone, is still one of the most substantial efforts to trace the plethora of Coleridge's mind (*The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* [Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1930]).

³⁰ One of the senses of paradise is 'A garden, *esp.* an enclosed one; an orchard' (see 'Paradise, n'. 4.a in *OED* online).

³¹ In a letter to Thomas W. Smith of June 1809, Coleridge compares his mind to an enclosed garden: 'Intensely studious by Habit, and languidly affected by motives of Interest or Reputation, I found in my Books and my own meditations a sort of high-walled Garden, which excluded the very sound of the World without'. What Coleridge built within those walls was nonetheless hard to pin down, for himself and for others. One example of the former is *The Friend*, to which the letter refers to: 'but the Voice within could not be thrust out—the sense of Duty unperformed, and the pain of Self-dissatisfaction, aided and enforced by the sad and anxious looks of Southey, and Wordsworth, and some few others'. 'Kubla Khan' was equally elusive, as was his table talk for those who listened (*CL* III 216).

And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
 It flung up momentarily 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,
 And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
 And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
 Ancestral voices prophesying war! (*PW* I.1 513)

The stanza begins by describing the creation of the path through which the river Alph would eventually run. Or, to use the poem's words, a 'deep, romantic chasm' allowed the river to slant 'Down the green hill'. The word 'chasm' is not only used to describe the river's path, but also the violent genesis of the river itself ('And from this chasm [. . .] / A fountain momentarily was forced'; 'It flung up momentarily the sacred river'). Yet 'chasm' could also refer to the violence with which ideas are formed and flow, in a river-like fashion—interestingly, a commonplace description of Coleridge's table talk (and, for Wordsworth, the 'truest and liveliest'). Moreover, the change of rhythm suggested by 'Chasm' resembles Wordsworth's comparison of Coleridge's table talk to a river whose current was 'caught at intervals [. . .] then came flashing loud and distinct'.

The river's path resembles, in turn, one of the elements that Coleridge thought should carry a reader forward whilst reading a poem, that is,

by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. (*BL* II 14)

Having the meandering river Alph symbolise meandering thoughts makes the whole scene not just about the genesis of the river, but the genesis of a 'vision' as well. The story of inception, however, keeps being interrupted by successive comparisons ('as holy and enchanted as'; 'As if'; 'like rebounding hail, / Or chaffy grain'), which act as little toads. Coleridge thereby suggests that thoughts, whether in writing or speaking, are not formed linearly. Indeed, like the water insect, they have pulses of active and passive motion, forcing listeners and readers to half recede. Although challenging to follow, this uneven rhythm forces them to admire the journey itself. Yet readers and listeners seem to have taken Coleridge's words too literally: when they got lost in the meandering of Coleridge's thoughts, the only thing they did admire was indeed the 'path of sound through air', that is, the musicality of 'Kubla Khan', or of Coleridge's voice.

The use of sexual metaphors in 'Kubla Khan' not only contributes to the plethora of hardly connected images, but also reveals that the stanza is concerned with conception. Placing Alph's genesis in the second stanza indicates, in turn, that 'Kubla Khan' begins *in medias res*, since the river Alph had already reached the caverns in the first stanza ('ran / Through the caverns'). This suggests that 'Kubla Khan', despite not being linear, has an underlying logical sequence—even if, like Coleridge's talk, one could easily get lost in its abundant images, meandering in mazy motion.

As the river reaches the 'lifeless ocean', Kubla hears voices—strangely, of ancestors—'prophesying war'. The link between the voices and the genesis of the river, like the links between topics when Coleridge talked, is not clear, nor is the connection between this and the following stanza:

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! (*PW* I.1 513–14)

Coleridge uses repetition to convey a sense of contrast in this stanza. Of the initial 'pleasure-dome', only a 'shadow'—that is, a remnant of the initial vision—remains. Furthermore, the caves, described as 'measureless' in the first stanza, are now bound by the restraints of a 'mingled measure'. The use of 'measure', as Seamus Perry maintains, is precise: 'it is both a musical organisation (a "harmonised Chaos") and a renewed form of attention, bringing the caverns' measurelessness to order'.³² Yet, I add, the word 'measure' can also mean poetry.³³

The effort to contain the 'measureless' within measure, akin to Kubla's effort to contain his paradise within walls is described, not just as a 'miracle', but as one 'of rare device'. If the use of 'miracle' suggests the impossibility of the vision, the use of 'device', which can refer to the imaginative faculty, suggests that the failure to put it into measure (that is, into verse) is Coleridge's.³⁴ The poem's ending only accentuates the tension between the visions of Kubla and Coleridge, respectively:

A damsel with a dulcimer
 In a vision once I saw:
 It was an Abyssinian maid,

³² Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 204.

³³ This is not the only occasion in which Coleridge uses 'measure' in this way. In one poem about versification, he writes: 'This is a galloping measure; a hop, and a trot, and a gallop' (*PW* I.1 528); in 'The Silver Thimble' the poet 'lays / In simplest measures hymn'd to ALLA'S praise' (*PW* I.1 245); and in a poem addressed to the poet Matilda Bentham, Coleridge writes 'Tho' sweet thy Measures, stern must be thy Thought' (*PW* I.2 727).

³⁴ See 'device, n. 1a': 'The action of devising, contriving, or planning; the faculty of devising, inventive faculty; invention, ingenuity', in *OED* online.

And on her dulcimer she play'd,
 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! (*PW* I.1 514)

The 'Abyssinian maid', whom Coleridge saw in 'a vision', enters the poem unannounced, playing 'on her dulcimer', in yet another instance of Coleridge skipping from one thing to another too fast and unconnectedly. The poet longs to revive the maid's 'symphony and song' and imagines that the delight of reviving it *would* allow him to 'build that dome in air'. By echoing Kubla's 'stately pleasure-dome', Coleridge implies that reviving the maid's song would allow him to become Kubla, but by building his vision in verse, rather than walls.

The use of the conditional and the first person in this stanza are important. Indeed, whereas the miracle was previously described in the past tense ('It was a miracle of rare device'), the attempt to revive the 'vision once I saw' is in the subjunctive ('Could I revive within me'; 'To such a deep delight 'twould win me'), as well as in the first person ('I would build that dome in air').³⁵ These are, in fact, the only instances where either the conditional or the first person are used in the poem. It is thus significant that Coleridge uses them to refer to building 'that dome in air'—that is, to building the vision Coleridge had, in verse. Moreover, the repetition of some of the elements that constituted the 'miracle of rare device', namely the 'sunny dome' and the 'caves of ice' only highlights the difference between Kubla, who can decree his vision, and Coleridge, who cannot put his into metre.³⁶

It is worth noting, furthermore, that Coleridge attempts to preserve his 'Vision in a Dream' by endeavouring to remember the sound of the Maid's song. Indeed, it is the 'delight' that he would feel that would enable him to 'win', that is, to proceed with his vision ('To such a deep delight 'twould win me, / That with music loud and long, / I would build that dome in air'). After many attempts at gaining *fulcrum*, it is when Coleridge realises that he has failed poetically that he attempts to *win* his way up by yielding to the current. Coleridge is thus in the same position of his readers and listeners: he, too, is like the water-insect fighting against the stream. His visionary thoughts keep

³⁵ Anya Taylor sees the Preface as 'undercut[ing] the experiential sense of the poem's wholeness', thus agreeing with O'Neill, whom she quotes and who did not think that the 'wish falls short', since '[t]he "I" can be read as completing an exultant poem on the basis of the wish for completion'. This reading, however, entails an opinion of the poem that Coleridge did not seem to share, not to mention that nothing in the moment when the 'I' is used conveys the idea that the task of reviving the maid's song is achieved; see, 'Coleridge's Self-Representations', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick 107–24 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 114.

³⁶ The Crewe manuscript read 'Amora', then 'Amara' (*PW* I.1 514, n. 41). The likely reference to the false Abyssinian paradise in *Paradise Lost* further suggests that Coleridge's vision, like Kubla's, is doomed from the beginning.

flowing, and, in the attempt to make his way up his vision, he is unable to yield to it as he wished.

The references to sound help to make sense of 'Kubla Khan' as a fragment of a vision. The last stanza retrospectively affects all others, but particularly the lines 'Where was heard the mingled measure / From the fountain and the caves', which are described as a 'miracle of rare device'. I have argued that these, together with the line 'caverns measureless to man', which works like a chorus, indicate that Coleridge failed put the vision into 'measure', that is, into verse. Repeating versions of the word 'measure' to describe the two visions creates tension between Kubla's—which is achieved, even if briefly—and Coleridge's, whose walled achievement is 'Kubla Khan'. Moreover, repetition means that Coleridge is admitting failure, not just in the last stanza, but from the fourth verse of the first. Furthermore, the plethora of images and allusions in the poem, the lack of links between thoughts (which often take unexpected turns), and the poem's windedness (similar to Coleridge's own description of winded thoughts) distracted its first readers from the dominant theme: a poem that fell short of an ideal. Even though the poem's topic could be partly uncovered by the musical allusions it contains, to its first readers—much like Coleridge's first listeners—it simply sounded like music.

In a notebook entry about 'two types of talkative fellows', Coleridge wrote that

The first sort is of those who use five hundred words more than [there] needs to express an idea—that is not my case . . . The second sort is of those who use five hundred more ideas, images, reasons &c than there is any need of to arrive at their object/till the only object arrived at is that the ~~readers'~~ mind's eye of the bye-stander is dazzled with colors succeeding so rapidly as to leave one vague impression that there has been a great Blaze of colours all about something. Now this is my case—& a grievous fault it is/my illustrations swallow up my thesis. (CN II 2372)

Coleridge acknowledges that his 'grievous fault' is not using an excess of words, but of 'ideas, images, reasons &c'. He admits, moreover, that his tendency for accretion repeatedly leads to incomprehension. Indeed, he leaves others 'dazzled' but confused ('one vague impression [. . .] all about something') by letting his illustrations 'swallow up' his thesis.

This description applies not only to Coleridge's talk, but also to 'Kubla Khan'. Both are exemplary of a mind unlike an 'hortus siccus; full of specimens of every kind of plant, but dwarfed, ready cut and dried'. They are, on the contrary, 'like the flower plucked wet with the dew; nay more, you could see them growing in the rich garden of his mind'.³⁷ Stemming from the rich garden

³⁷ Coleridge is referring to James Mackintosh, whom he saw as an example of 'Talent': 'He was like a liquor shop, where if you ask for gin, out they pour it from this phial; if for brandy, from that; so whatever was the subject, Mackintosh had a pre-arranged discourse upon it. In short he was, as the chief of men of Talent, of course very powerful; but he possessed not a ray of Genius'. The contrast is with Humphry Davy's genius. (TT I 40–42).

of Coleridge's mind, both talk and poem are thus, like Kubla's paradise, plentifully abundant, winding, and growing. Although listeners and readers often got lost in the meanders of Coleridge's plethora of illustrations, which swallowed up his thesis, I have argued that deeming either talk or poem '*nonsense*', although understandable, is unsound.