CHAPTER IV

The Stream Of (Un)Consciousness In “Kubla Khan”

‘...a hundred years before William James and James Joyce he was aware of the stream of consciousness.’ (Baker 153)

When J.V Baker made this comment on Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” in The Sacred River, he perhaps meant to read a psychological significance (in terms of conscious and unconscious thoughts) into the sacred river in “Kubla Khan”, the most widely read and diversely interpreted of Coleridge’s poetical works. What fascinates me is not merely the poetic symbolism of the river of consciousness employed in this poetic masterpiece. Prof. M.H.Abrams defines ‘the stream of consciousness’ as employed in novels as a ‘mode of narration that undertakes to capture the full spectrum and flow of a character’s mental process in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, feelings and random associations (Abrams 164). We can discern in the poetics of “Kubla Khan” a revelation of the poet’s mental processes where his sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts derived partly from wakeful thoughts, partly from opium-induced dream reveries, partly from dreadful nightmares and memories of his diverse readings. These resources also include feelings associated with the past and the present, personal and general, his aesthetic perceptions, a random association of all these and a crowning effort of imaginatively stringing all together. In fiction such a technique is applied by means of broken syntax disjointed sentences and in some cases by violation of logical grammatical rules. In poetry where a poet enjoys
greater liberty of syntax and other rules of logical construction the stream of
consciousness becomes almost a characteristic part of his structural essence. Considered
as a modernist innovation, with creative writers consciously exploiting its resources in
the form of a narrative technique revealing the unfathomed of the human mind
complexity of the human mind caught up in the maze and mire of rapidly changing
modern times, Coleridge's peculiarly effective employment of the technique establishes
his relevance to the modern reader.

A study of the stream of Coleridge's mental progression as revealed in his poetical
works a study of "Kubla Khan" in this light will enable us to understand better the richness
of thought and the delicacy of feeling that marks this climactic phase of Coleridge's
genius. There have been immense critical debates over "Kubla Khan" as a dream reverie
or the production of a conscious mind. Coleridge's own account of the circumstances
that led to its composition tends to complicate the issue. Coleridge criticism has even
gone to extremes of forensic investigation of the effects of laudanum to validate
Coleridge's statement about his hallucinating after taking opium. All such studies,
scholarly though they are, tend to take us away from the aesthetic pleasure of reading the
poem. In fact, "Kubla Khan" is not the product of wholly conscious efforts, or entirely
unconscious day-dream, nor mere hallucination; neither is it merely an amalgamation of
memorable readings, nor does it merely record the feelings of a romantic—it is all
blended in one, an exemplification of Unity in multiplicity.

As to the alleged fragmentary nature of the poem we tend to assert that a closer
reading reveals a basic coherence between the two sections. In a notebook entry of 1814,
Coleridge has randomly jotted down his flitting thoughts; these have an astonishing resemblance to those embodied in “Kubla Khan”.

The sentimental cantilena respecting beningily and loveliness of nature how does it not sink before the contemplating of the pravity of nature, on whose reluctance and inaptness a form is forced (the mere reflex of that form which is itself absolute substance!) and which it struggles against, bears but for a while and then sinks with the alacrity of self seeking into dust or sanies, which falls abroad into endless nothings or creeps and covers in poison or explodes in havoc! What is the beginning? What the end? And how evident an alien is the supernatural in the brief interval. If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke.... Ay! and what then? (Anima Poetae 143)

There is no evidence that the continuity of this entry had been disrupted by any ‘man from Porlock’ and that the entry is of fragmentary nature. Hence there is no justification in denying the continuity of thought pattern in the two sections of “Kubla Khan”. If the first section presents the opposites, in their distinctiveness, the second attempts to blend them into unity in the paradisial vision of the poet. But then, there is more to convey by “Kubla Khan” than the prose entry of the notebooks cited above. The diary entry is a product of consciousness—in our consciousness we express one thought at a time, but in our dreams, diverse thoughts clash with each other for expression. Coleridgean images, operating through association, cast their shadow
momentarily on the stream of consciousness, whereby they dissolve and subtly induce other cross-currents of thoughts to cast their shadows in the former's place. Now such dissolution of one image into another is valid when explained by the dream analogy. Hence, there lies a ground for Coleridge’s assertion that the images came to his mind in a state of trance, or of dream.

That Coleridge attached immense importance to dreams as a source of poetic inspiration is evident in his numerous notebook entries. Strangely enough, his drowning consciousness in state of sleep, that have been quite often referred to, have a faint connection with the sacred river in “Kubla Khan” that rushes with tumult into a deep cavern.

To fall asleep is not a real event in the body well represented by this phrase- It in excess when on first dropping asleep we fall down precipices, or sink down, all things sinking beneath us, or drop down (NI 1078 21.203)

............... 

O then, as I first sink on pillows, as if sleep had indeed a material realm 

....O then what visions have I had, what dreams.......... I sink down the 

The waters, thro’ Seas and Seas yet warm, yet a spirit. 

(NI 1718 16.105).

In another entry of 1802, we find the following lines

A river, so transluscent as not to be seen and yet murmuring shadowy world and these a Dream/ Inchanted River. (NI 1124 6.132)
The reference in the poem to images from Milton's Paradise Lost justify another random entry that also stresses on the quality of dreams.

To have a continued dream, representing visually and audibly all Milton's Paradise Lost. (NI 658 10.24)

Again, when Coleridge speaks of his desire to recreate in poetry through love what the conqueror Kubla Khan intended to do in art through force and decree, we gauge the emphasis laid on dreams as the source of poetry.

Bear witness for me, what thoughts I wandered about with if ever I imagined myself a conqueror, it was always to bring peace but mostly turned away from these thoughts to more humane and peaceable dreams.

(NI 1214 2.10)

The frequent use of capitals to denote the word 'dream', compel us to accept the term not as an ordinary drug-induced hallucination, but as a romantic vision, an artistic vision where "the conscious is so impressed upon the unconscious as too appear in it."

(BLU 258)

Coleridge believed poetry to be a rationalized dream; the dream figures in 'Kubla Khan appear to have been rationalized only when we take into account the figures that welled up from his memory as he penned them. Now, Coleridge was by nature a forgetful person; his mind was loaded out of capacity with such out-of-the-way thoughts and ideas he gathered from his diverse readings and experiences, and he would often scribble a flitting thought in his notebook for the fear of forgetting it. This is confirmed by his own words in a notebook entry of 1803;
Memory carried on by the fear of forgetting/ then writing a thing down rids
the memory of it. (NI 1388 8.7)

Prof. Livingstone Lowes in his epoch-making study The Road to Xanadu draws
our attention to the immense erudition of Coleridge ranging from classical literature of
Plato to Milton, from the religious texts, the mythological lores, the history of the eastern
culture and also the highly fanciful tales from The Arabian Nights. When Coleridge
mentally encompassed all these diverse elements by Hartleyan associations, we discern
the role played by memory in culling out the poetic images in “Kubla Khan”. Again,
Patricia Adair discern in the sacred river a distant echo of the legendary river of Mount
Helicon indissolubly linked with Orpheus, the sweet singer of ancient world and quotes
Miss Harrison’s translation of Orphic tablets that speak of a ‘spring on the left, which the
soul is warned not to touch’. The spring, she contends, is the legendary river of
forgetfulness, which flowed through Hades.

The well which other tablets locate on the right is Mnemosyne,
‘the lake of memory. (Adair 115)

The diverse images in “Kubla Khan’s” owe their origin partly to ‘a mode of
memory emancipated from the order of time and space’; ‘but equally with the ordinary
memory, it must receive all its material ready made from the law of associations’. The
immediate spark of thought, as Coleridge claims, had been initiated by the following
lines from Purchas’s Pilgrimage :

Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden
there unto and these ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a
wall. (PW 296)
And so begins Coleridge's poem:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers girdled round: (PW 297 ll 1-2 &6-7)

But wherefrom did originate the idea of 'Alph, the sacred river', that 'ran/
Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea'? The diverse theories
regarding the origin of the idea point to Coleridge's diverse readings, from Maurice's
Indostan to Greek mythology, from Milton's Paradise Lost to the biblical allusions to the
guilty Cain, that impart a richness to the symbolic connotation of the river. Naturally
enough, these readings were stored in his memory and in "Kubla Khan" these have been
culled out to give the poem a richer complexity than was originally intended.

'Alph' might have derived its name from the Alpheus of greek mythology which
ran under ground to re-emerge as the fountain Arethusa in Sicily. It seems very probable
that the Alpheus merged in Coleridge's mind with Lithe and Mnemosyne and Helicon.
Again in the description of the earthly paradise of Kubla, we find faint reflections of
Elysium, the gardens of the Hesperides, the Promised land of Canaan, Milton's Paradise,
the mountain gardens of Cashmere and Purchas's description of Aladin's Mohammedan
paradise.

In a notebook entry of 1803, we come across these words which are to some
extent relevant to our analysis of Coleridge's memorable readings which were at the back
of his mind when he came to compose 'Kubla Khan'.

--Conquest of India by Bacchus in Hexameters--
In her note to this entry, Kathleen Coburn comments that Coleridge was well acquainted with Maurice’s *Hindostan*, Wilkin’s translation of the *Bhagavadgita* and T.A.Dubois *The People of India*. Maurice whose study attempts to connect the two ancient civilizations, Indian and Greek, speaks of the origin of Bacchus in India, though he is generally thought of as the Greek God who intoxicated his worshippers with wine and possessed them with divine madness of spiritual ecstasy. Coleridge’s indebtedness to Maurice in relating the conqueror to Bacchus is conceivable from one of his lectures of 1813-14.

In his earthly character (Bacchus was) the Conqueror and civilizer of India, and allegorically the Symbol- in the narrower and the popular notion of festivity, but worshipped in the mysteries as representative of the organic energies of the Universe, the work by passion and joy without apparent distinct consciousness, and rather as the cause or condition of skill and contrivance than result …. with the ancients Bacchus or Dionysus was among the most awful and mysterious deities- in his earthly character etc. to such passions. (Shakespeare Criticism 184)

The earth throwing up ‘huge fragments’ in ‘half-intermitted bursts’ from the ‘deep romantic chasm’ symbolize the organic energies of the universe, the sunny pleasure dome being a ‘work by passion and joy’ without apparent distinct consciousness and finally the frenzied poet having drunk the milk of Paradise speak of the Dionysian worship-all these closely follow Coleridge’s words on Bacchus and his conquest of India.
The idea of a conqueror and his great Conquest obviously reminded Coleridge of ‘Cublai Can’, who ‘began to reign, 1256 the greatest Prince in People, Cities and Kingdoms that ever was in the world’. Again, in Kubla’s pleasure resort we discern Mohammad’s sensual paradise.

Mahomet had promised such a sensual Paradise to his devout followers. (Lowes 330)

Coleridge’s lines on Mohammed, the prophet and priest, in his poem “Mahomet” of the same year, establishes a faint connection between Mohammed and Kubla Khan for both ‘scattered abroad both evil and blessing /huge wasteful empires founded and hallow’d slow persecution’.

In Kubla’s persona, therefore, we find a rich profusion of historical and mythological characters culled out from the poet’s reservoir of memory.

Even the landscape that Coleridge describes as the site of Kubla’s pleasure resort might have an immediate link with that he recalled from his trip to Germany and noted in his diary

The waterfall at the head of the vale (the circular mountain walled vale ) white, steadfast, silent from Distance/ the River belonging to it, Smooth, full, silent the Lake into which it empties also silent/ yet the Noise of waters everywhere/ something distant/ something near . ‘Tis far off and yet everywhere / and the pillar of smoke/ the smooth
winterfields - the indistinct shadows in the Lake are all eloquent of Silence. (N1 1784 16.170)

Added to this first hand perceptual inspiration, were others from various works referred to earlier. In Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan, Elizabeth Schneider notes a clear implication of Milton's topography in the laying out of Kubla's more indefinite garden.

Milton's subterranean Tigris is appropriately translated into the subterranean Alpheus with its Sicilian fountain of inspiration, since the Paradise river is by tradition also the first of rivers, 'Alph'.

(Schneider 266)

Again, the descent of the river into subterranean depths may be connected with the descent of Aeneas to underworld in Virgil's Aeneid (Book-6). Schneider goes on to discern echoes from Milton's Lycidas in the water haunted lines of "Kubla Khan". The caves of ice, as they appear in the poem, too might have come, as Lowes points out, from Maurice's reference to a cave, 'an Image of Ice' in the mountain of Cashmere.

Commenting on the supernatural in the poem, John Beer too detects Miltonic influence looming large in the backdrop

'The woman wailing for here demon lover' is also reminiscent of the Syrian damsels' lamenting the fate of Thammuz in Milton's poem, while in the last stanza the mount Abora of which the damsel with the dulcimer sings.....looks back to the mount Amara....... which Milton presents as one of the types of his true 'paradise' and the 'symphony and song' with which the poet would build his dome recalls the 'Dulcet Symphonies and voices sweet' with which Milton's daemons built their palace of
The figure with 'flashing eyes' and floating hair', resound with echoes from Plato's Ion and Phaedrus and also recalls the inspired poet —prophet in Gray and Collins. Lower traces the figure to a confluence of Bruce's king of Abyssinia, whose hair on one occasion floated, and the youths who were followers of Aloadin- an impersonal mysterious figure vaguely reminiscent of The Arabian Nights beheld by Coleridge in his dreams. The description also derives a good deal from the accounts of persons possessed by the god in Dionysus worship and the orphic cults. It also reminds us of Shakespeare's alignment of the 'poet, lover, and lunatic' in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

It is indeed intriguing that a poem which asserts the triumph of poetry and superiority of poets above all artists, Coleridge should so heavily draw upon Plato who considered poetry to be a morally impoverished art form and hence banished poets from his Republic. In Coleridge's description of the poet in creative ecstasy, we observe a recreation of the same image of the frenzied poet in Dialogues of Plato translated by Jowett:

In the like manner the muse first of all inspires man herself .... For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, composed their beautiful poems not by art , but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Corybantine revelers when they dance are not in their mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains; but when falling under the power of music and metre they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who
draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in the right mind. And the soul of the lyric poet does the same, as they themselves say: for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; they, like the bees winging their way from flower to flower. And this is true. For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him; when he has attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles. (Jowett 501-2)

Coleridge’s borrowings from various literary, critical, historical, and mythological texts show how he called up memory from the deep of the cavern of the mind through conscious and semi conscious processes by the power of association. But “Kubla Khan” is certainly not a product of consciousness and semi-consciousness alone; rather it is the off-shoot of a heightened consciousness reached at through an imaginative process.

In a letter to Southey of 1803, Coleridge speaks of his disgust with Hartleyan theory of association, and looks forward to an active participation of mind in imagination as Kant proposed:

I almost think that ideas never recall ideas, any more than leaves in forest create each others motion- the breeze it is that runs through them- it is the soul, the state of feeling. (L 1 428)
Now is the right occasion to look into the true ‘state of feeling’, the ‘soul’ of “Kubla Khan”.

III

In his search for the ‘oneness’ of vision, Coleridge turned to the East for inspiration; it seemed that the Oriental world would offer him a vision of the multiplicity that he would try to order into unity. An exploration of the East with its bizarre remoteness would not only lend the charm of wonder and mystery, but would also hold out promises of Infinite Perceptions in its manifold multiplicities. I would quote successively two notebook entries to support the claim that Coleridge’s romantic leaning towards the oriental civilisation bore fruit in the poetic delineation of ‘Xanadu’ in ‘Kubla Khan’.

A subject for a romance – finding out a desert city and dwelling there/- Asia- (N1 7.11.18)

..............................................................

..... I would make a pilgrimage to the burning sands of Arabia, or etc.etc. to find the Man who could explain to me there can be oneness, there being infinite Perceptions- yet there must be a

Oneness, not an intense Union but an Absolute Unity.(N1 556 5.51)

Therefore, the simultaneous existence of the opposites in Nature, as it is observed in the description of the site for Kubla’s pleasure- palace, seems to be an Eastern possibility. The Lake District with its too tame and cultivated backyard
would have provided the poet little scope for an imaginative and romantic exploration of the remote and the savage along with the ordered and the cultivated. The juxtaposition of the bright sunlit dome with the 'sunless sea' that the river Alph runs into, the measured garden and the measureless caverns, the natural forests and the cultivated gardens, the stately height of the hills and the sublime depth of the 'romantic chasm, silence and clamour, movability and immovability, slow and fast motion, activity and passivity, rise and fall- all these are possible to imagine in the dream-like backdrop of the East.

To give the dualism exhibited by the site an extended significance, Coleridge chose the persona of Kubla Khan to study the dualism that lies in the Nature of Man- Kubla, according to some critics, is the architect of a civilisation, a man with immense artistic potential, and the fit subject to be studied in romantic literature. For others, however, Kubla is necessarily an Oriental despot whose attempts to unify by force or 'decree' results in inevitable devastation.

But I strongly feel that Kubla's personality, like his pleasure site, embraces both the opposite extremes that critics speak of. Now, Coleridge admired Shakespeare's 'signal adherence to the great law of nature, that all opposites tend to attract and temper each other". This 'signal adherence to the great law of nature' is observed in the personality of Kubla Khan that exhibits him on the one hand as a dictating autocrat given to sensual pleasures, and on the other, as an artefact of a civilisation that can boast of rare specimens of art and architecture. In his poem 'Mahomet' to which I have already referred, Coleridge speaks of the simultaneous existence of such dualism, that moved him to
comment, 'I shall go on with the Mohammed' (Ll 531). This is because the mighty conqueror, his artistic sensibilities juxtaposed with his brutal, despotic propensities, provided Coleridge with ample scope for his study of human nature as a unification of the agreeables and disagreeables. The Khan's love for Beauty on the one hand, and beastly brutality on the other, speak of the ambivalence that is inherent in the nature of every man. With Kubla, Coleridge launched his remarkable quest for 'One Life' where the disagreeables and the agreeables co-exist complementing and tempering one another.

The sacred river Alph has been given a wide variety of symbolic interpretation, and judging from Coleridge's philosophic and aesthetic views, all the critical interpretations seem to have sound arguments in their favour. Hence the river may be taken to symbolise Life (personal and general), one's stream of consciousness, Truth, and above all, Poetry. In my view, these interpretations, seemingly discreet though they are, are linked by a Unity of Vision- Coleridge's attempt to sanctify the Truth of our inward Nature through the medium of Poetry. The encompassed, measured, artificial and sensual paradise of Kubla is starkly opposed to the infinite, measureless, supernatural, sublime 'romantic chasm' with 'cedar in cover'. But the sacred river that flows through both these contrasted realms establishes a sacred link between the two. The river, then, is the process by which we discover the Unity that essentially underlies whatever is disparate in Life and Nature.

Here we may refer to a composition of 1805, "What is Life", which reveals Coleridge's view of Life in the same vein as "Kubla Khan" does.
Resembles life what once was deem'd of light
Too ample in itself for human sight?
An absolute self-an element ungrounded-
All that we see, all colours of all shade
By encroach of darkness made?(PW 394 ll-1-5)

The river Alph that hugs the light of the sun for a brief spell, flows, for the greater part of its course, in the cavernous depths embracing infinite darkness. Now, light for Coleridge is linked with hope and optimism, it is also associated with a finitude of sensuous perception. Light ensures visual impression that is anything but sensory and hence, concrete. On the other hand, darkness may symbolise despair and a death-in-life attitude; it also holds out promises for abstract experience and abstruse research of a world beyond the reach of sense perceptions. For Coleridge, then, Life in its totality is a conglomeration of light-embracing happy moments of sensual gratification and dark dreary moments without earthly pleasures, when finds himself deeply embedded in out of the way-thoughts and metaphysics. Here Coleridge is found to be in agreement with his predecessor in Romanticism William Blake who claimed 'without contraries there is no progression'.

The river’s progression is therefore the limitless progression of Life from sense to sensibility

Is very life by consciousness unbounded?
And all the thoughts, pains, joys of mortal break,
A war-embrace of wrestling in life and death? (PW 394 ll 6-8)
Man's activities, like Kubla's are entirely opposed to each other. It is a brief spell in life when Man, like the Kubla, orders his impulses into measured activities. It is also a momentary phase in one's life when he consciously reins his thoughts and gives them balanced utterances and translates them into orderly deeds. But for a major part of one's life, man's deeds and words spring from the deep subterranean consciousness or 'demonic' impulses. The frequent use of the words 'sacred', 'holy' associated with the river's underworld course affirms Coleridge's attempts to restore the demonic impulses of man to glory and establish their sanctity.

......the greater and perhaps nobler certainly all the, subtle parts of one's nature must be solitary. Man exists herein to himself. And to god alone/-yea ,in how much lies below his Consciousness. (N1 1554 21.274)

The descent of Alph into the romantic chasm in the poet's attempt to plumb the depths of our Consciousness.

Man but an half animal without drawing-but yet he is not meant to be able to communicate all the greater part of his Being must (be) solitary-ever of his Consciousness.

It was Coleridge's endeavour, therefore, to poetically delineate the river of Consciousness and to restore the demonic underworld force in its purest form as the most necessary and beneficial of human powers.

Of a great metaphysician/ he looked at(into?) his own Soul with a Telescope/what seemed all irregular, he saw and
showed to be beautiful, Constellations and he added to the
Consciousness hidden world within worlds. (NI 1798 16.182)

When he looked into his own Soul, a self critical Coleridge detected in his
being indolence capable of Energies. This sign of complacence is observed in the
river's earthly course (‘Five miles meandering in a mazy nation’) while the very
same river becomes a specimen of dynamicity and vigour in its underground
course.

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething
As if this earth in fast thick parts were breathing
A mighty fountain momently was forced.
Amid whose swift half intermittted burst
Huge fragment vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath thresher's flail
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river. (PW 297 ll 17-24)

The measureless cavern may therefore signify the unexplored, untapped
potential in Life and Nature, a minor portion of which is translated perceivable
deeds.

The sacred river may also be taken to symbolise Truth. Coleridge seems to
have been toying with this idea when recorded Milton's words in a notebook
entry of 1796.
Truth is compared in scripture to a streaming fountain if her waters flow not in perpetual progression, they stagnate into a muddy pool of conformity and Tradition. (NI 119 G.113)

Coleridge, as he himself confessed, had always looked upon Truth 'askance and strangely'. He was sceptical of men who are guarded towards Truth by the constant testimony of their senses.

They contemplate nothing but parts, and all parts are necessarily little. And the universe to them is but a mass of little things. It is true that the mind may become credulous and prone to superstition by the former method; but are not the experimentalists credulous even to madness in believing any absurdity, rather than believe the grandest truths, if they have not the testimony of their own senses in their favour? (LI 354)

The Truth that Coleridge speaks of is that which encompasses the grand paradoxes in Life and Nature. It is a positive affirmation of the rational and the irrational, the logical and the illogical that co-exist side by side in Life and Nature. A minor portion of man’s passions and impulses can be comprehended when they originate in our consciousness, but a majority lies beyond the reach of comprehension because they spring from the fathomless depths of our subconsciousness. As to nature and her strange operations Man’s rational education can provide logical explanation to a few phenomena; the greater part however, like, the underground river, is inaccessible to the rational and scientific minded man.
Coleridgean Truth lies, therefore, in one cot recognition of the opposing tendencies in Nature within and without, not as discreet and disparate of a wondrous W. Our sacred river speaks this gospel of Truth.

IV

The Rime of Ancient Mariner was a study in power of Communication: Christabel dealt with problems and failure of Communication; “Kubla Khan” goes a step ahead in presenting the potentialities of Communication, its subsequent failures, and finally asserting its triumph the medium of poetry.

Kubla’s sacred river ‘Alph’ descended into his subconsciousness from the memory of the river Alpheus which I have already referred to. However, Coleridge’s mental pre-occupation with the ideal of communication seems to suggest that ‘Alph’ may have some hidden connection with alphabet, and its name may have been drawn from the first letter of Greek alphabet alpha. The probability is not a far fetched one because in one of Coleridge’s notebook entries we find him to have established a link between Kubla Khan and ‘letters’.

Kubla Khan ordered letters to be invented for his people.

( NI 1281 8.30 )

The sacred river may be human language that gives fertility to the human mind (language and all symbols give outness to thought ) and empowers it with the skill in Communication. The terrestrial site of Kubla’s pleasure dome watered fertile by the meandering river makes us aware of the conscious, social pattern of our thoughts which can be effectively communicated by language and speech.
The problem arises when we try to translate our subliminal thoughts and passionate feelings into words. They are dismissed as socially and morally outrageous utterances. Kubla Khan being the architect of a civilisation, his attempt to make his subjects lettered may be taken as man’s attempt to pragmatise his actions in social and civilised terms. The figure of man as social outcast, a recluse, a solitary being communicating with God in the realisation of his deepest consciousness, may appear noble to the poet’s view, but it is equally repugnant to the civilised world guided by a singular notion of social decorum. The river of communication thus flows silently under the deepest caverns of one’s psychological consciousness. At times, however, such thoughts burst out into the open in the form of words, and the silence of the river to eloquence as vestiges of the dark underworld (‘rocks and stones’) are flung out into the open. In the midst of such outbursts, Kubla hears ‘ancestral voices prophesying war’. Kubla’s ancestors, then, may be taken to be our primitive forefathers who gave a free rein to their unimpeded passions, feelings and desires. The ‘prophesy of war’ is the distressing foreboding of ravage, ruin and destruction of the artificially induced peace and decorum of the civilised world.

The original Crewe manuscript of "Kubla Khan" spells ‘demon-lover’ as ‘Daemon-lover’. The use of capital and alteration of spelling confirms Coleridge’s attempt to sanctify the daemonic power, the power of the unconscious, which is still a mystery. From this mysterious power of unconscious that lies too deep for comprehension by rational senses and logical understanding,
springs Coleridge’s belief of the supernatural. As Cazamian observes, the essence of the supernatural for Coleridge is entirely psychological.

To descend to the depth of our consciousness is to discern the immanent being; in this way, we are able to penetrate beyond the plane of appearance and sense; it is only in questioning ourselves that we can unravel the Universe; the true, the only events are those of the soul, and the essential domain of poetry is this inner theatre.

( Leguois 1012 )

It is therefore obvious that in the savagery of the natural chasm and it is not in the tameness of the artificial garden that the spirits would find their dwelling place.

A savage place! as holy and enchanted

As e’er beneath a waning Moon was haunted

By Woman wailing for her Daemon Lover! ( PW 297 ll 14-16 )

Alien to our rational Consciousness, the Supernatural is a close-bosom friend of the undercurrent of thoughts in the depths of our un-Consciousness which no logic or reason can check or impede. Coleridge in his advocacy of the Supernatural and the Unconscious, anticipates Freud and Jung and their theories on psychology.

Now, Coleridge was anything but against the mechanical, ordered explanation of the universe and of the human mind. He was sceptical of views which were formed on the superficial impression, ‘natura naturata’ of things. He was anxious to probe beyond the surface of things, to explore the deep dark and
secret vistas of human mind and to draw out the inner essence, the 'natura
naturans' of things.

For Coleridge, therefore, it was important to communicate effectively the
concealed, the remote, and the incomprehensible as he would the concrete visual
world. It is relevant, in order to restore Art and Truth to its former glory, to water
both the Conscious and the Subconscious, to link both in an interrupted stream of
progression.

Coleridge's sacred river precisely performs this functions of establishing a
sacred but secret connection with all that is seemingly disparate and inconsistent.

Let us now compare and contract this natural unification with the Kubla's
artificial, 'decreed' imposition of order on chaos.

Beautified with curvy hills, embroidered by sunny spots of greenery and
perfumed by aromatic trees, the site of the Kubla's pleasure dome is anything but
a feast for the senses. Kubla's sensual paradise is too earthly to take even the sub­
earthly into its domain. Girdled and encompassed by walled towers, it is symbolic
of a confined vision that leaves out the brute and pravity of Nature from its
sensual interests. It becomes clear that the presence of the deep romantic chasm
into which the sacred river plunges would have put the Emperor into discomfort;
hence his effort to remain encircled by what appeals strictly to the senses.

But there is more to Nature than that which appeals to our senses. The
deep romantic chasm might seem awe-inspiring on account of its fathomless
depths, yet it is a holy as the terrestrial site. Kubla's pleasure- garden marvels
man's creation, but the chasm with cedarn cover marvels Gods creation, hence it
is ‘holy’ and ‘sacred’. The essential Oneness that characterises the artificial garden and the subterranean plot, requires for its realisation a perfect intellect.

The dim intellect sees an absolute Oneness, the perfectly clear Intellect knowingly perceives it. (NI 1725 16.377)

The Khan stands for the dim Intellect who is aware of the multiplicity of Nature, but, he is in such love with life, that he turns his back to the brute and the incomprehensible facts. His affections remain confined within the girdled promises of an easy doctrinair. What interests me here is that we can discern, in Kubla’s complacence, Wordsworth’s contentment with the benevolent forms of Nature. Inspite of his wide expanse of vision that could discern, the comprehensibility as also the incomprehensibility of Life and Nature, Wordsworth remained contented with the comprehensible forms, leaving out the pravity and brutality of life and Nature out of his domain of interest.

On the other hand, Coleridge was more interested in the bizarre, remote, savage and irrational operations of the Universe. Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge was obsessed with the dark, cavournous consciousness that plunge into the sea of Death, and this is suggested by the recurrence of ‘death in life’ images in his poems, starting from The Rime to the lines he composed for his epitaph. But it is also true, that in these moments of anguish, he toyed with abstract thoughts and metaphysical solutions to the Mystery of Life. And again, he was aware of his shortcomings as a poet because, as he himself says, ‘I think too much for a poet’(LI 294) and ‘A great Vice is Metaphysical solution in Poetry’(NI 673 10.34). In this respect he found Wordsworth way ahead of him, because ‘he
is a Philosopher, because he knows the intrinsic value of the different objects of human pursuit, and regulate his wishes in strict subordination to that knowledge, because he feels, and with practical faith, ... that we can do one thing well and that therefore we must make a choice. This 'unity of interest' that characterised Wordsworth was opposed to Coleridge's diversity of interest.

In formulating a poetic process, Coleridge therefore felt that an amalgamation of his and Wordsworth's genius would give shape to an Ideal Genius. In that way, Nature could be translated into thought, and Thought into Nature, the external Internal and Internal External. John Bier's comment on the classification of Genius with respect to 'Kubla Khan' deserves special mention.

Coleridge, for his part, would, in discussing the relation between sublimity and fear, associated it more naturally with the phenomena of genius. Genius, he would argue, differs according to whether it is associated with a strong sense of life is happy and self contained. He drinks of his own genius as at a self renewing fountain and creates his work of art with the effortlessness of a sun rising and illuminating the entire landscape. But if his consciousness includes a strong sense of death, the nature of his genius becomes correspondingly different. The very objects which before reflected his sense of his own immortality and were splendid now becomes objects of fear to him. He becomes obsessed with savage and ruinous places which speak more directly to his own fears. (Beer 57-58)
Hence, if Coleridge's vision of the icy death-like caverns could be entombed with the foil of Wordsworth's sunny life-embracing philosophy, it would give shape to a 'miracle of rare device'—a perfect rotund of artistic symmetry on the one hand and truthful entirety on the other. It would be an artistic representation of Life, in its war-embrace of wrestling life and death.

It is with this particular intention of giving the pleasure of contrast, did Coleridge compose these lines

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 298 ll 26-30)

When Coleridge speaks of 'the various outcries of battle in the song of security and triumph' in his essay 'On Poesy or Art,' we have a clear conception of the voices providing a pleasurable contrast to the Khan's supposed security and triumph. The same intention runs behind the image of the 'sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice.' I shall again refer to Coleridge's words the same essay in this context

...in order to form a philosophic conception, we must seek for the kind, as the heat in ice, invisible light etc; whilst, for practical purposes, we must have reference to the degree. It is sufficient that philosophically we understand that in all imitation two elements must co-exist, and not only co-exist, but must be
perceived as co-existing. These two constituent elements are likeness and unlikeness, or sameness and difference, and in all genuine. Creations of art there must be a union of these disparates. (BL II 255)

Did the Khan achieve the desired reconciliation in art? The second section that contains the following words answers in the negative; the poet endeavours to complete the task left unfinished by the Khan

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 298 ll 43-47)

George Watson found the Khan too tyrannical an aristocrat to be taken as a model of the creative artist. I too agree with his view that Coleridge, with his romantic and liberal tastes might have seen through the brittleness of the Khan's prodigious pleasure palace. Whatever Kubla does, he cannot escape the fact that his sensual paradise must inevitably be lost, just as Milton's was eventually forced to move down to desolate sea. It would then require a poet, inspired by the Muses, to restore the Paradise to its spiritual glory.
In the essay ‘On Poesy or Art’, Coleridge speaks of Architecture, that ‘it shews the greatness of man, and should at the same time teach him humility’. Music, then, is the most entirely human of the fine arts because in it man discovers his potential, and retains his humility too.

“Its first delightfulness is simple accordance with the ear, but it is an associated thing, and recalls the deep emotions of the past with an intellectual sense of proportion.” (BL II 261)

The immense importance Coleridge attached to music as an art form explains the lines

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. (PW 298 II 37-41)

The poet would reconcile by Love, not by ‘decree’, and music shall be his appropriate medium to fulfil his mission.

Love to all passions and Faculties, as music to all to varieties of Sound. (NI 1229 2.25)

Now, to draw all things in one, in humane and peaceable forms, requires the power of the poet, who alone can combine feeling with thought, sensual delight with profound wisdom. When Yeats in his ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ speaks of the architecture and artificers of Byzantium, we can recall the superb
craftsmanship of Kubla's empire. Yeats's final attempt to sing, like the golden bird of Byzantium, through poetry, of spiritual ecstasy again recalls Coleridge's attempt to unify the architecture of the lost world with the power of a divinely ecstatic song.

In between, however, the poet, has to undergo utter transformation from the sensuality to spirituality. The poet in Byzantium emerged from the purgatorial fire; the poet in "Kubla Khan" emerge purged of sensuality when he has had a glimpse into the paradisical world of the Abyssinian maid. She too would be his soul's singing master as the sages who stand in the holy fire would be for the Byzantine poet. In this process he would acquire the Self Knowledge that makes a poet.

Ignore thyself, and strive to know thy God! (481110)

Having attained self knowledge the poet exudes the same. Mystery as that he marvels upon. We have already discerned Platonic touches in the description of the poet wild in creative frenzy, the references to Bacchus and Dionysian worship has also been highlighted. What appears interesting is Coleridge's obsession with the figure of the poet as a social outcast, an awe-inspiring Mystery, or being with more than common interests which import a fierce vivacity to his appearance. The lines describing the poet in the creative frenzy in 'Kubla Khan'

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. (PW 298 ll 48 – 54)

These have a close resemblance with the lines from “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” composed in 1800.

The poet in his lone yet genial hour
Gives to his eyes a magnifying power;
Or rather he emancipates his eyes
From the black shapeless accidents of size-
In unctuous cones of kindling coal;
On smoke unwreathing from the pipe’s trim bole,
His gifted Ken can see
Phantoms of sublimity. (PW 345)

Again in a notebook entry we come across the words

Such a fierce vivacity as fires the eye of Genius fancy-crazed.

(NI 197 G.193)

The poet thus turns out to possess two fold energies- that of a profound metaphysician and of a great bard. He that is gifted with the power of Imagination, the power that reduces the multitude into a Unity of effect by a strong passion deserves the title of poeta nascitar nonfit- he is a child of Nature and not a creature of his own efforts. He is a miracle in Genius marvelling in the
miracle in Nature. He is a Mystery in himself and hence, sacred and holy and so, deserves the ritual dread.

Traversing the subtle nuances of ‘Kubla Khan’ we can obviously refer to the lines in ‘Phantom Or Fact’ compound as late as 1830.

Call it a moment’s work (and such it seems)

This tale’s a fragment from the life of dreams;

But say, that years matur’d the silent strife,

And ‘tis a record from the dream of life. ( PW 485 ll 17 – 20 )

‘Kubla Khan’, in its streaming continuity links the unconscious (life of dream) with the conscious (dream of life) in a partly unconscious and passive process of associating from Memory and partly conscious and active process of fusing with Imagination. Man may come, and man may go, but Kubla’s sacred river shall go on for ever so long as poets shall live and Poetry shall survive.
WORKS CITED


