



**HAL**  
open science

# Coleridge diffracted: translating the opening lines of Kubla Khan

Patrick Hersant

► **To cite this version:**

Patrick Hersant. Coleridge diffracted: translating the opening lines of Kubla Khan. Matthew Reynolds. Prismatic Translation, Legenda, pp.297-311, 2020, 978-1-781887-25-7. 10.2307/j.ctv16km05j.20 . hal-04004902

**HAL Id: hal-04004902**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04004902v1>**

Submitted on 24 Apr 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## CHAPTER 15



# Coleridge diffracted: on the opening lines of *Kubla Khan*

*Patrick Hersant*

Translate my name, says [God], but at the same time he says: You will not be able to translate my name, because, first of all, it's a proper name.

JACQUES DERRIDA<sup>1</sup>

'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan...' While its tonal fluidity may sound like pure magic to the ear, the famous line is syntactically rather simple: a preposition, a place-name, a verb, and a name.<sup>2</sup> Despite the lack of any apparent ambiguities on a lexical or grammatical level, it has inspired a motley range of translations: the twenty versions compiled here bring to light, through their sheer diversity, some of the more poetic aspects of translation such as rhythm, sonority and connotation, as well as the performative dimension of the language (fig. 1). I do not intend to propose a new reading of *Kubla Khan* — perhaps the most scrutinized poem in the history of English literature<sup>3</sup> — but I will argue that the analysis of its opening lines, from a translation studies perspective, may bring to light some unexpected aspects and challenges in the translation of the poem: should (and could) names such as Xanadu and Kubla, neither of them 'in English', even be translated? If not, can the translation still preserve the poetic, exotic and — as we shall see — godlike dimension of these names?

What is perhaps most striking is that half of the translators of *Kubla Khan* chose to alter the toponym and/or the anthroponym, those 'rigid designators' that the modern practice of translation tends to leave intact.<sup>4</sup> The names Xanadu and Kubla Khan possess a history that precedes their use (and their reformulation) by Coleridge, but this rich history does not come to an end with their invocation in the poem. Rather, examining the various translations of *Kubla Khan*, we will see how this place-name and this surname, fixed in time by Coleridge at the end of the eighteenth century, have continued to evolve, even metamorphose, throughout the twentieth century up until now. Even if, at first glance, the diffraction of these names in the translations of *Kubla Khan* appears to betray the resonance and the intentions of the poem, they are in fact prolonging a poetic process of translation and appropriation undertaken by Coleridge himself.

Étienne Vauthier, 1934  
À Xanadou Koubla Khan fit bâtir  
un fastueux palais de joie

Henri Parisot, 1939  
C'est à Xanadu que Koubla Khan  
Fit bâtir un fastueux palais de plaisance

Germain d'Hangest, 1945  
En Xanadou le Koubla Khân fit ériger  
un palais majestueux

Louis Cazamian, 1946  
À Xanadu Kubla Khan ordonna  
De bâtir un majestueux palais

Henri Parisot, 1947  
En Xanadou, lui, Koubla Khan,  
S'édifia un fastueux palais

Henri Parisot, 1975  
En Xanadou donc Koubla Khan  
Se fit édifier un fastueux palais

Camille Fort, 2001  
À Xanadu c'est Kubla Khan  
Qui ordonna un haut lieu des plaisirs

Michel Midan, 2002  
À Xanadu, Kubla Khan décréta  
La construction d'un palais majestueux

Gérard Gâcon, 2005  
'En Zanadou, dit Koubla Khan,  
D'un dôme de plaisance je veux la merveille.'

Jacques Darras, 2007  
En Xanadu dit Kubla Khan  
Qu'on crée un grand dôme de plaisir

Wolfgang Breitwieser, 1959  
In Xanadu schuf Kubla Khan  
Ein Lustschloß, stolz und kuppelschwer

Edgar Mertner, 1973  
In Xanadu ließ Kubla Khan  
einen prunkvollen Freudenpalast errichten

Ramón López Ortega, 1978  
En Xanadú ordenó Kubla Khan  
que una augusta mansión de ensueño edificasen

Arturo Agüero Herranz, 2009  
En Xanadú, Kubla Khan  
Se hizo construir un espléndido palacio de recreo

José María Valverde, 1989  
En Xanadú, el Khan Kubla decretó  
alzar una solemne cúpula de placeres

Pedro António Janeiro, 2010
Em Xanadou, Kublai Khan havia construído Um palácio majestoso para seu prazer
Mario Praz, 1925
In Xandu ervesse Coblai Cane Per sue delizie un'alta mole
Mario Luzi, 1949
Nel Xanadu alza Kubla Khan dimora di delizie un duomo
Petru Iamandi, 1973
În Xanadu măreț palat Plăcerii Kubla hotărî
Konstantin Balmont, 1908
Въ странѣ Ксанадѣ благословенной Дворецъ построилъ Кубла Ханъ

TABLE 1. Twenty translations of the opening lines of Kubla Khan in French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian and Russian<sup>5</sup>

Our inquiry begins in Inner Mongolia, around 1275. Kublai, the Mongols' great Khan and Emperor of China, welcomes Marco Polo to Shangdu, the summer capital of his far-flung empire. The Venetian merchant, dazzled by the palace of Genghis Khan's grandson, gives a detailed description of his wonder in his *Book of the Marvels of the World*, in which he describes the sixteen years he spent with the emperor: 'Una città nominata Xandú, la qual edificò il gran Can che al presente regna, detto Cublai Can; e quivi fece fare un palagio di maravigliosa bellezza e artificio, fabricato di pietre di marmo e d'altre belle pietre, qual con un capo confina in mezzo della città e con l'altro col muro di quella.'<sup>6</sup> In the beginning of the seventeenth century, this passage from Marco Polo was translated into English in *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, an anthology of travel writing published by Samuel Purchas.

In the fall of 1798, in southwestern England, Samuel Taylor Coleridge has just turned 25 years old.<sup>7</sup> He has moved into a cottage in Somerset at the beginning of the year with his wife Sara and their one-year-old son. On this autumn day in 1798, taken with a 'slight discomfort', the young poet swallows a few drops of opium to soothe his dysentery and drifts off into a dreamlike lethargy. As he falls asleep holding the Purchas anthology in his hands, one of the passages from Marco Polo sparks a dream about architecture: 'in *Xamdu* did *Cublai Can* build a stately Palace, encompassing fixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleafant Springs, delightfull Streames, and all forts of beafts of chase and game, and in the middest thereof a sumptuous house of pleafure.'<sup>8</sup> During a deep sleep that lasts three hours, the slumbering poet effortlessly composes some two to three hundred verses. Awaking in a trance, he rushes to write them all down but only manages to capture some of them before 'a person from Porlock' calls and takes over an hour of his time. When this unfortunate nuisance takes his leave, alas, the poet is left grasping at a handful of scattered memories. Only fifty-four verses from this dream-poem survived. The first were directly inspired by Purchas, and through him, Marco Polo:

S. T. Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*, 1816

In **Xanadu** did **Kubla Khan**

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled round:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,

Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;

And here were forests ancient as the hills,

Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

Samuel Purchas, *Purchas, his Pilgrimage*, 1613

In **Xamdu** did **Cublai Can** build a stately Pallace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightfull streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be moved from place to place.

Marco Polo, *Il Milione* c. 1290 (Italian translation 1556)

Una città nominata **Xandú**, la qual edificò il gran Can che al presente regna, detto **Cublai Can**; e quivi fece fare un palagio di maravigliosa bellezza e artificio, fabricato di pietre di marmo e d'altre belle pietre, qual con un capo confina in mezo della città e con l'altro col muro di quella.

TABLE 2. Spelling of name and place-name in Marco Polo, Samuel Purchas and S. T. Coleridge

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.

It's a very compelling — but, most likely, untrue story.<sup>9</sup> No matter: whether authentic or fictive, Coleridge's prose preface to the poem, with its imaginary tale of the circumstances surrounding the composition of *Kubla Khan*, foreshadows and sustains the essential themes of a poem that oscillates between fragmentation and profound unity. Inspiration, vision, and the unconscious as well as poetic frustration all loom large. Translation also plays a role, as the poem presents itself as the poetic deployment of a short prose passage. The attentive reader will have noticed that the two proper nouns that concern us here, Xanadu and Kubla Khan, are spelled differently by Polo, Purchas, and Coleridge (Table 2). Before turning to the different translations of *Kubla Khan* and the evolution of these names after Coleridge used them, it seems useful to quickly sketch their diachronic evolution before the poem. My initial approach will be chronological as I trace the translation of the name 'Kubla Khan' and the place-name 'Xanadu' before Coleridge's time

(from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries), to Coleridge's two versions of this poem (from 1798 and 1816) and, finally, in the many translations of *Kubla Khan* that followed.

Marco Polo was the first man ever to transcribe the Chinese place-name 元 上 [Yuan shangdu] to describe the summer palace of Kubilai, the first Mongolian emperor from the Yuan dynasty at the end of the thirteenth century. The transliteration was probably produced via Mongolian, a language Polo had learned during his stay even though he did not know Chinese. This name, which means 'the high capital of Yuan', is transcribed as 'Ciandu' by Polo — or at least by the writer of *The Description of the World*, who actually was not Polo himself: from a shared prison cell in Genoa, in 1299, he dictated his recollections to Rustichello da Pisa, who then composed the book in a mix of a Pisan dialect and the langue d'oïl.

The circumstances surrounding the composition, publication, and translation of Marco Polo's work remain unclear: an original manuscript does not really exist, although there are a dozen editions written in various languages. The seven oldest versions of the text (in Tuscan, Venetian, French, French-Italian) present numerous linguistic challenges such as a mix of languages in the French-Italian version, or traces of Italian and the appearance of Oriental words from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Mongol or Chinese which appear in the French account.<sup>10</sup> In 1824, in the appendix of their edition of *Les Voyages de Marco Polo*, the Société française de géographie established spelling variants for the proper names taken from the diverse editions of the travels of Polo written in Italian, Latin and French.<sup>11</sup> It appears that the transcription 'Ciandu', or its variant 'Cyandu', prevails in the majority of editions except for one: in *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, a text published in Venice between 1550 and 1556, which is considered the first treatise of modern geography. The Italian humanist Giovan Battista Ramusio translates Polo's text by choosing the spelling 'Xandu' — a seminal spelling variation because it moves away from the pronunciation of a 'tʃ' in favour of an initial 'X' which henceforward became the norm.<sup>12</sup>

In sixteenth century England, Ramusio's Italian version served as a source for Richard Hakluyt who then compiled these travel narratives in *The Principal Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, which appeared as a series of three volumes between 1598 and 1600.<sup>13</sup> In the seventeenth century, after Hakluyt's death in 1616, his former assistant Samuel Purchas added to the anthology with the title *Hakluytus Posthumus, or, Purchas his Pilgrims*, which came out in 1625.<sup>14</sup> It has been shown that Coleridge was familiar with Purchas's anthology, but it is not clear which edition he consulted. The 1617 edition, which his friend Wordsworth owned, transcribes the key place-name as 'Xamdu'; in the 1613 edition, 'Xaindu' appears.<sup>15</sup>

The name Kubla also presents a complex etymology and orthographic evolution, from its beginning as a transliteration from classical Mongol as 'Qubilai'. Once again, it seems likely that Marco Polo was the first person to transcribe into a Romance language the name of the Mongolian emperor, the founder of the Yuan dynasty. The Société de géographie's table comparing these names shows numerous

variations from the diverse translations of Polo's account: Cublay, Cublim, Choblay — to which the spelling 'Coblay Cane' was added. Not mentioned in the chart, this variant was widespread in other Italian versions of the text. In Purchas's text, the name appears under the form 'Cublai' in three editions. As for the title of Khan, the Mongolian term for king, it is formulated in the many translations of Marco Polo as Chan, Khan, Kaan, and Cane, among others. It is then found in English under a great number of orthographic variations.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the variations in the name of the Mongolian ruler may well chime with Coleridge's 'uncertainty about how to pronounce his own surname' — Col-ridge, Cole-ridge, Coal-ridge, Colleridge — , and the 'even greater indecisiveness about what his full name really [was]'.<sup>17</sup>

Coleridge wrote *Kubla Khan* in 1798 but did not publish it until 1816, at Lord Byron's urging, in a slender volume that also contains the poems 'Christabel' and 'The Pains of Sleep'. The prose preface where the poet sketches the circumstances of the creation of this poem also appears in this edition. A second version exists which was established from a signed manuscript discovered in 1934 in a private library — this crucial document, the Crewe Manuscript, is today housed at the British Museum. The differences between the two versions of the poem are few and hardly meaningful, except, as it happens, for those concerning the proper names. The Crewe Manuscript (1798) reads 'In Xannadù did Cubla Khan', while the 1816 edition reads 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan'. Perhaps because he was heir to a language with a long etymological and literary history that changed conventions of spelling and pronunciation from one century to another, Coleridge himself changed the proper nouns from one version to the next: Cubla becomes Kubla, Xannadù becomes Xanadu. In this particular formulation, Xanadu is Coleridge's unique creation.<sup>18</sup> Coleridge's re-spelling also signals remarkable onomastic and poetic implications as the metamorphosis of these names underscores the importance of their visual appearance and their resonance from the first verse of the poem<sup>19</sup>.

On an onomastic level, the name of the Mongolian emperor and of his palace have inspired the most diverse — sometimes the most far-fetched — commentary; it is true that the poem itself seems to authorize or call for interpretation, even over-interpretation. As Richard Gerber says: 'The fusion of the oriental Khan Kubla or Cublai (in Coleridge's source and preface) or Cubla (in Coleridge's [Crewe] manuscript) and the Great Mother Kubela, Kubele or Cybele consisted in the similarity of names which can play such an important part in dreams.'<sup>20</sup> Another critic suggests a parallelism with Cain, but this comparison is more pertinent to the Ancient Mariner than to Kubla Khan.<sup>21</sup> In addition to these diverse possible connotations, the two proper names add to the rhythm and the sonority of the opening verse. As one commentator notes, 'aesthetically, the rhythmic suavity of the name with its careful alternation of consonant and vowel sounds is deserving of rather more than casual regard.'<sup>22</sup> Another underscores the importance of the letters that make up these proper nouns: 'Its very names are so lettered as to suggest first and last things. [...] Xanadu, which starts the poem, is enclosed in letters that might well be called eschatological; while Kubla Khan himself sits alphabetically central with his alliterating k's'.<sup>23</sup> Many critics are rightly impressed by the self-



In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

FIG. 15.1. Pattern of assonances and alliterations

contained symmetry of the opening line: '[It] receives its primary shape from the enclosed assonance of its four stresses, *u— u— u— u—*, which swings the sound as if in a shallow curve, the symmetry being still further marked by the full rhyme of the enclosing 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: In Xanadu did Kubla Khan'.<sup>24</sup>

One might wonder, then, why certain translators chose to alter these names that are so thoroughly laden with a sense of history and meaning, so marked by their sonorous, rhythmic, and connotative qualities. On the one hand, the fact that these are proper nouns might discourage their alteration; but on the other hand their sonic charge (which in the poem is determined by the phonetic system of English) is also of extreme significance, and the desire to preserve this can lead to altered spelling. There is no obvious or satisfactory way of keeping the name unchanged across languages: same spelling suggests different pronunciation — for instance, even when the written letter 'X' stays the same through transmission across languages, the pronunciation will change: 'z' in English, 'ʃ' in Portuguese, 'cs' in German and Italian, and 'gz' in French — , while endeavours to preserve the pronunciation inevitably create different spelling, as illustrated (Fig. 15.1) by our sample of translations into seven different languages<sup>25</sup>.

In German, both Breitwieser and Mertner keep name and place-name intact — visually if not vocally, since Xanadu will be pronounced /csanədu:/ by their readers. In the Spanish translations by López Ortega, Agüero Herranz and Valverde, the version of the place-name offers an accented 'u' — 'En Xanadú' — , but as this is a common Spanish accent the effect is not particularly exotic; rather than altering the pronunciation of the vowel, then, the accent suggests a stress on the last syllable. To more foreignizing effect (as many Portuguese words end with an 'u'), Janeiro adds an 'o' — 'Em Xanadou' — , creating a diphthong where there was none: /ʃanədəu/. In Romanian, Iamandi keeps both 'Xanadu' and 'Kubla' as they are in the original English, but he omits the title 'Khan' — 'Plăcerii Kubla hotărî' — for rhythmic rather than sonic reasons, presumably, as this allows him to maintain the original octosyllable. Similarly, the requirements of Russian syllabotonic versification inspired Balmont to drop the final vowel in the place-name: 'Въ странѣ Ксанадѣ благословенной' — the 'ѣ' being silent, the place-name simply becomes /zanəd/. In the Italian version by Luzi, neither name nor name-place are altered; in the rendition by Praz, however, standard spellings of the place-name and surname from the Marco Polo editions are both Italianized and exoticized, as the



'y' was never part of the Italian alphabet: 'In Xandu erness Coblay Cane.' This is certainly the most interesting — and the most questionable — case, for Praz refers directly back to Polo without making apparent the evolution of names that, via the translations of Polo and the editions of Purchas, led to the creation of the term Xannadù in the Crewe Manuscript and eventually to Xanadu in the definitive version of 1816 (fig. 4).

In French, Xanadu is more often than not left as is, although occasionally the spelling is changed to imitate the English pronunciation. Parisot, who published three different translations of *Kubla Khan* over a span of forty years, begins by using Coleridge's version before opting, after 1947, for the addition of an 'o' — Xanadou — that indicates that the place-name should be pronounced /zanədu:/ and not /zanədy/. Other translators, such as Vauthier and d'Hangest, follow suit, undoubtedly for the same reasons; Gâcon, however, is the only one to employ the logic of this phonetic transcription throughout: the French reader, tempted to say 'dy', is also at special risk of mispronouncing the first letter of the place-name as 'gz' in stead of just 'z'. This explains why Gâcon spells both 'Koubla' and 'Zanadou'. One comes across even more surprising spellings, such as d'Hangest's choice of 'Khân' which claims to highlight, through the circumflex, the exotic and archaic dimension of the name — in the nineteenth century, non-French accents were sometimes meant to render exoticism, as for instance in Pauthier's spelling 'Khoubilâi Khan'.<sup>26</sup>

Cazamian, Fort, Midan and Darras all leave name and place-name unchanged, confident that the modern reader will not mispronounce them. A possible explanation comes to mind: it is more than likely that, by the time they published their translations of the poem, between 1946 and 2007, both Xanadu and Kubla Khan were perceived as common names (and indeed common nouns) even for the French poetry reader, who might have heard them uttered a number of times in Orson Welles's 1941 *Citizen Kane* (note the Coleridgean echoes in the sound chain of the film's title, z-n /k-n). We may then date back to 1941 the time when Xanadu actually became a common name/noun, as the script of the film, immediately after the famous mystery-word 'Rosebud', reads: 'Legendary was *the* Xanadu where Kubla Khan decreed his stately pleasure dome. (...) Today, almost as legendary is *Florida's* Xanadu — world's largest private pleasure ground.'<sup>27</sup> In that respect at least, an apposite analogy might be drawn between the emperor's palace in Xanadu and the mythical tower of Babel — or indeed the very word 'Babel' interpreted as 'confusion' by Jacques Derrida: 'Now, a proper name as such remains forever untranslatable, a fact that may lead one to conclude that it does not strictly belong, by the same right as the other words, to the language, to the system of the language, be it translated or translating. And yet "Babel", an event in a single tongue, the one in which it appears so as to form a "text", also has a common meaning, a conceptual generality.'<sup>28</sup> Few words in literary history, it seems, have gone through so many re-spellings and allowed for so many diverse articulations as Xanadu, this 'translatable-untranslatable name' testifying, as did Babel, to 'forbidden transparency, impossible univocity'.<sup>29</sup>

Chinese / Cyrillic Mongolian		元上都	Хубилай хаан
Mongolian (VPMC transliteration)		Šandu	Qubilaï qayan
Marco Polo	1298	Giandu	Coblay Cane
	var.	Ciandu	Cublay
	var.	Ciandai	Choblay
	1550	Xandu	Cublai
Samuel Purchas	1613	Xaindu	Cublai Can
	1617	Xamdu	
	1619	Xandu	
S. T. Coleridge	1798	Xannadù	Cubla Khan
S. T. Coleridge	1816	Xanadu	Kubla Khan
Translations	1925	Xandu	Coblay Cane
	1934	Xanadou	Koubla Khan
	1989	Xanadú	Khan Kubla
	2003		Koubilaï Khan
	2005	Zanadou	
	2007	Xanadu	Kubla Khan
	2010	Xanadou	Kublai Khan

TABLE 3. Diachronic evolution of name and place-name until 1816 and their subsequent diffraction through translation

The preposition *in* and the verb *did* equally play a determining role in the musicality as well as the structure of the verse. Their very brevity is essential, for it reinforces the exotic dimension of the proper nouns. The place-name and surname take up six of the verse's eight syllables, making it almost incomprehensible, as if it was uttered in some foreign language. English is hardly present (just in these two monosyllables) and barely recognizable as such. The predominance of the foreign names in the first verse seems to create a tonality that is halfway between exoticism and magic, two of the poem's essential themes. At its heart, this first verse is scarcely English; beyond the mysterious, almost incomprehensible place-name and surname, the grammar is of no great help either. The auxiliary verb *did* postpones the actual verb, *decree*, to the following verse, so that the initial iambic tetrameter appears to lack a verb — and, therefore, meaning. The *in* and the *did* are so miniscule, so lost within the surrounding mass of sonority and unfamiliar letters, that the entire first verse comes across as an incantatory formula, a sort of long abracadabra.<sup>30</sup> The second part of the poem stages a scene of sorcery, chiefly through the act of encirclement: 'Weave a circle round him thrice | And close your eyes with holy dread' — but this magic spell has been cast from the poem's opening.

There remains one final formal element, which is crucial to truly understanding the poem, that most of the translators of *Kubla Khan* have not been able to see —

or able to translate. When the poem is read aloud, assonance dominates in the first line: i a a u / i u a a, creating a chiasmus effect which reinforces another important phenomenon: the performativity of the verb *decree*. Kubla, it should be stressed, did not decree the construction of a palace, as he does in Purchas: ‘he commanded a palace to be built.’ Rather, he decreed a palace. *Fiat lux, et lux fuit*: just as in the Vulgate, Khan’s words not only carry the decree of law but they benefit from an absolute sort of efficiency: what Khan says will be. The chiasmus in the Latin, playing off the paronymy between *fiat/fuit* with the simple ‘*et*’ exposing at the center the evidence and immediacy of divine creation, finds an echo in the *did*, but also in the vocal chiasmus mentioned earlier. Meschonnic’s meditation on translating the Bible pertains here: ‘The first verse starts with a syntactical problem that is also a theological problem.’<sup>31</sup>

Can any translation preserve these aspects of the first verse, a line so crucial that it enacts the meaning of the entire poem? In order to do so, the translator should first respect the absence of any perceptible grammatical structure, the incantatory dimension that tends toward exotic euphony and letters, and a sense of the indecipherable. The apparent ungrammaticality of the first verse, allowing the reader-listener the possibility of believing in a magic spell intoned in some unknown language, could not resist the apparition of any verbal structures and personal pronouns such as ‘fit bâtir’, ‘C’est à... que’, ‘fit ériger’, ‘ordonna’, ‘décréta’, ‘schuf’, ‘ließ’, ‘eresse’, ‘decretó’. On that count, the majority of the *Kubla Khan* translations fail to produce a line that is at once outlandish and mysterious with its absence of verbs: too many of them do include a verb, sometimes an unwieldy one of several syllables, which detracts from the incantatory effect created by Coleridge.

In a similar fashion, no translator seems to have noticed the performative dimension that is offered by ‘decree... a pleasure dome’. The divine *fiat lux* is reduced to far less audacious formulations such as ‘se fit édifier’, ‘fit bâtir’, ‘ließ errichten’, ‘eresse un’alta mole’, ‘decretó alzar’. Some translators, however, are careful to preserve the semantic mystery, and they manage to recreate the effect of this lexical exoticism barely punctuated by two identifiable monosyllabic words: ‘En Xanadou, lui, Koubla Khan’ (Parisot), ‘À Xanadu c’est Kubla Khan’ (Fort), and especially ‘En Xanadu dit Kubla Khan’ (Darras). In view of the criteria discussed above, it seems that Jacques Darras’s translation is the only one that satisfies, as it manages to preserve the iambic tetrameter of the original as well as the minimal presence of ordinary language as glimpsed in the monosyllables, which are paronyms with the English (*in/en, did/dit*):

En Xanadu dit Kubla Khan  
Qu’on crée un grand dôme de plaisir

Darras’s translation conveys the vocal chiasmus and the fluctuating syntactic and semantic senses — elements that harmonize to allow us to hear for ourselves the powerful language of the Mongolian emperor. Furthermore, in the following verse, the performative nature of the ordering language is, by some miracle, preserved: the divine *fiat*, transformed into the imperial decree of Coleridge, becomes in French: ‘dit... qu’on crée’ — literally: ‘said... to create’. Just slightly less performative than

the original English, this formulation offers a new paronym in the guise of pseudo-etymology: *decree* / 'dit... crée'.

From Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'Avalon' to Hilton's 'Shangri-La', Swift's 'Lilliput' and Tolkien's 'Mordor', proper nouns that both don't belong in the English language and are laden with historic and exotic resonances pose a particular challenge when it comes to translating them — or, perhaps even more so, *not* translating them. It appears that translation is not always a matter of moving out of one language and into another, but rather of working with the varied resources of a language continuum, reshaping words and remaking texts in varying ways in different places and moments, using the ever-changing resources of language that are available, as well as the ever-altering imaginations of translator-readers. The graphic variations on Xanadu and Kubla Khan, that span from before Coleridge and persist after him, present a surprising continuity-within-discontinuity: through their initial transliteration, temporary crystallization and ultimate diffraction, they illustrate a particular practice of translation as 'just a moment within a long series of other interpretations of the same poem, a consent readily given by the translator to the work of others in the years to come'. The poet Yves Bonnefoy names this *le traduire*: 'While each particular translation is less than the original, translating as such, the practice that we name translating, will be, in the long run, equal to it and possibly even more.'<sup>32</sup> The multiple interpretations of the first lines of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* certainly enrich our comprehension of the poem; viewed together, their various prismatic shades blend into another one to provide a diachronic and polyphonic commentary as richly varied as the poem itself.

## Works cited

- BALLARD, MICHEL, *Le Nom propre en traduction* (Paris: Ophrys, 2001)
- BONNEFOY, YVES, *La Communauté des traducteurs* (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2000)
- COLERIDGE, SAMUEL TAYLOR, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Ernest H. Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969)
- , *The Collected Letters*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71)
- COOPER, LANE, 'The Abyssinian Paradise in Coleridge and Milton', *Modern Philology*, 3. 3 (1906), 327–32
- DERRIDA, JACQUES, 'Des tours de Babel', trans. by Joseph F. Graham, in *Psyche. Inventions of the Other*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 191–225
- , *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. by Christie V. McDonald, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988)
- FLEISSNER, ROBERT F., *Sources, Meaning, and Influences of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': Xanadu re-routed: a study in the ways of romantic variety* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2000)
- GERBER, RICHARD, 'Cybele, Kubla Khan, and Keats: An essay on imaginative transmutation', *English Studies*, 46. 1–6 (1965), 359–89
- , 'Keys to Kubla Khan', *English Studies*, 44 (1963), 321–41
- GRASS, THIERRY, 'La traduction comme appropriation: le cas des toponymes étrangers', *Meta: Translators' Journal*, 51. 4 (2006), 660–70
- HILL, JOHN SPENCER, *A Coleridge Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1983)

- KNIGHT, G. WILSON, *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (New York: Routledge, 2002)
- KRIPKE, SAUL, 'Naming and Necessity', in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. by Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972), pp. 253–355
- LACH, D. F., 'The Far East', in *The Hakluyt Handbook*, ed. by D. B. Quinn, 2 vols (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1974), 1, pp. 214–15
- LOWES, J. L., *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927)
- MAN, JOHN, *Kublai Khan: from Xanadu to Superpower* (London: Bantam, 2007)
- MANKIEWICZ, HERMAN J. and WELLES, ORSON, 'The Shooting Script', in *The Citizen Kane Book*, ed. by Pauline Kael (New York: Bantam, 1971) pp. 127–306
- MEIER, HANS HEINRICH, 'Ancient Lights on Kubla's Lines', *English Studies*, 46. 1–6 (1965), 15–29
- MESCHONNIC, HENRI, *Pour la poétique II: Épistémologie de l'écriture poétique de la traduction* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973)
- NEWMARK, PETER, *A Textbook of Translation* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1988)
- PATRICK, JOHN M., 'Ammianus and Alpheus: The Sacred River', *Modern Language Notes*, 72. 5 (1957), 335–37
- PERRY, SEAMUS, 'Coleridge's Names', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, n.s., 11 (1998), 37–47
- POLO, MARCO, *Dei Viaggi di Messer Marco Polo, gentiluomo venetiano* [1298], in Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi* (Venice: Giunti, 1583)
- , *The Description of the World*, trans. by A. C. Moule and P. Pelliot, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1938)
- PURCHAS, SAMUEL, *Hakluytus posthumus, or, Purchas his Pilgrimes*, 4 vols (London: Fetherston, 1625)
- RÉCANATI, FRANÇOIS, 'La sémantique des noms propres: remarques sur la notion de "désignateur rigide"', *Langue française*, 57 (1983), 106–18
- SCHNEIDER, ELISABETH, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953)
- SHAVER, CHESTER LINN, *Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue* (London: Garland, 1979)
- SMALL, MARGARET, 'A World Seen through Another's Eyes: Hakluyt, Ramusio, and the Narratives of the *Navigazioni e Viaggi*', in *Richard Hakluyt and Travel Writing in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Cary and Claire Jowitt (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 45–56
- SNYDER, EDWARD, *Hypnotic poetry: a Study of Trance-inducing Technique in Certain Poems and its Literary Significance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1930)
- STEVENSON, WARREN, *A Study of Coleridge's Three Great Poems* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2001)
- WORTHEN, JOHN, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

## Notes to Chapter 15

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. by Christie V. McDonald, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 201.
2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan: Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment', in *Poetical Works*, ed. by Ernest H. Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 295–98.
3. See John Spencer Hill, *A Coleridge Companion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), p. 61.
4. On rigid designators, see Saul Kripke, 'Naming and Necessity', in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. by Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1972), pp. 253–355; François Récanati, 'La sémantique des noms propres: remarques sur la notion de "désignateur rigide"', *Langue française*, 57 (1983), 106–18. On the translation of proper nouns, see Michel Ballard, *Le Nom propre en traduction* (Paris: Ophrys, 2001); Thierry Grass, 'La traduction comme



- appropriation: le cas des toponymes étrangers', *Meta: Translators' Journal*, 51. 4 (2006), 660–70; Peter Newmark, *A Textbook of Translation* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1988), pp. 35–36, 214–16.
5. References: *Hermès*, 3 (1934), 53; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Koubla Khan* (Paris: GLM, 1939); Coleridge, *Vingt-cinq poèmes* (Paris: Aubier, 1945), p. 323; Louis Cazamian, *Anthologie de la poésie anglaise* (Paris: Delamain, 1946) p. 204; S. T. Coleridge, *Le Dit du vieux marin* (Paris: J. Corti, 1947), p. 91; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poèmes* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1975), p. 275; *Tropismes*, 13 (2006), 79; Michel Midan, *Voix d'outre-Manche* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002), p. 91; Gérard Gâcon, *Le Lait de paradis* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2005), p. 251; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *La Ballade du vieux marin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 187; S. T. Coleridge, *Der alte Seemann und Kubla Khan* (Heidelberg: Lambert-Schneider, 1959), p. 254; S. T. Coleridge, *Gedichte* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1973), p. 181; Ramón López Ortega, *Antología bilingüe* (Seville: Publicaciones de la Universidad, 1978), p. 33; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan y otros poemas* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2009), p. 167; José María Valverde, *Poetas románticos ingleses* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1989), p. 109; *Veredas Favip*, 3:2 (2010), 91; Mario Praz, *Poeti inglesi dell'Ottocento* (Florence: Bemporad, 1925), p. 161; S. T. Coleridge, *Poesie e prose* (Milan: Cederna, 1949), p. 86; *Translation Studies: Retrospective and Prospective Views*, 7 (2010), 41; Konstantin Balmont, *Izbrannyye stichotvorenija i poëmy* (Munich: Fink, 1975), p. 390.
  6. Marco Polo, *Dei Viaggi di Messer Marco Polo, gentilhuomo venetiano* [1298], in Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Navigazioni et Viaggi* (Venice: Giunti, 1583), pp. 16–17. In English: 'A city which is called Ciandu, which the great Kaan, who now lives and reigns and who has the name Cublai Kaan, who is spoken of in this book, made them make there. And in this city Cublay Kaan made them make there a vast palace of marble cunningly worked and of other fair stone [...] so well and so cunningly that it is a delight to see'. Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, trans. by A. C. Moule and P. Pelliot, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1938), 1, 185.
  7. The dating of the composition of the poem is controversial; in his 1816 preface to *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge mentions 'the summer of the year 1797', but this is widely believed to be a mistake. See Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, p. 295.
  8. Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus posthumus, or, Purchas his Pilgrimes*, 4 vols (London: Fetherston, 1625), IV, 418. It should be noted that the passage is misremembered by Coleridge, whose preface to *Kubla Khan* quotes: 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were enclosed with a wall'.
  9. See for example Warren Stevenson, *A Study of Coleridge's Three Great Poems* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), p. 27.
  10. Philippe Ménard, 'Le mélange des langues dans les diverses versions du *Devisement du monde* de Marco Polo', in *Le Plurilinguisme au Moyen Âge, Orient-Occident, de Babel à la langue une*, ed. by Claire Kappler and Suzanne Thiolier-Méjean (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009), pp. 233–49. See also Pierre Racine, *Marco Polo et ses voyages* (Paris: Perrin, 2012).
  11. 'Variantes et tableau comparatif des noms propres et des noms de lieux cités dans les Voyages de Marco Polo', in *Recueil de voyages et de mémoires*, ed. by Conrad Malte-Brun, 8 vols (Paris: Impr. d'Everat, 1824), 1, 534–35, 542–43.
  12. On initial 'x' the OED writes: 'The third value /z/, arising from a reduction of /gz/, is given in all cases to initial x, as Xerxes /'zɜːksɪːz/; this value is shown in many instances in the 17th and 18th centuries by the spelling with z, as Zanthian, zebeck, Zerez...'
  13. See Margaret Small, 'A World Seen through Another's Eyes: Hakluyt, Ramusio, and the Narratives of the *Navigazioni e Viaggi*', in *Richard Hakluyt and Travel Writing in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Cary and Claire Jowitt (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 45–56; D. F. Lach, 'The Far East', in *The Hakluyt Handbook*, ed. by D. B. Quinn, 2 vols (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1974), 1, 214–15.
  14. John Man, *Kublai Khan: from Xanadu to Superpower* (London: Bantam, 2007), p. 389.
  15. J. L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), p. 360–61; Chester Linn Shaver, *Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue* (London: Garland, 1979), p. 208.
  16. Among other spellings, the OED quotes 'caan, cane, can, canne, caunn, chaan, chane, chahan, chawn, khaun, khan, kan, kaan'. Among other examples in literature, it quotes John Mandeville:

- 'the Grete Caan of Cathay' (*The Travels*, 1425); Thomas More: 'ye graund Canis' (*A Dialogue of Comfort*, 1553); Thomas Herbert: 'the Chawn [...] of Shyras' (*A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile*, 1634); and John Milton: 'Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Can' (*Paradise Lost*, 1667).
17. Seamus Perry, 'Coleridge's Names', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, n.s., 11 (1998), 41. Perry goes on to quote a relevant passage from Coleridge's correspondence: 'From my earliest years I have had a feeling of Dislike & Disgust connected with my own Christian Name: such a vile short plumpness, such a dull abortive smartness, in [the] first Syllable, & this so harshly contrasted by the obscurity & indefiniteness of the syllabic Vowel, & the feebleness of the uncovered liquid, with which it ends — the wabble it makes, & staggering between a diss- & a tri-syllable — & the whole name sounding as if you were abeeceeing. S.M.U.L. — altogether it is perhaps the worst combination, of which vowels & consonants are susceptible.' *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–71), II, 1126.
  18. Xanadu is not the only new coinage in the poem: 'Coleridge even invented for it the simple word "greenery", new to the English language'. John Worthen, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 28.
  19. Since my focus here is on the meaning of the opening distich, I will not dwell on the evolution and translations of the two other names in the poem, Mount Abora and the river Alph — even though the latter has a particularly rich diachronic history and onomastic significance, and was translated into many different versions: l'Alphée (Vauthier), l'Alphe (d'Hangest), Alphe (Darras), Alphée (Cazamian), le fleuve Alphée (Parisot), l'Alph (Midan), Alph (Gâcon), Alph (Breitwieser), el Alfa (López Ortega), o Alfeu (Valverde), Alfeo (Ceni) and Alf (Praz). See John M. Patrick, 'Ammianus and Alpheus: The Sacred River', *Modern Language Notes*, 72:5 (1957), 335–37, and Lane Cooper, 'The Abyssinian Paradise in Coleridge and Milton', *Modern Philology*, 3:3 (1906), 327–32.
  20. Richard Gerber, 'Cybele, Kubla Khan, and Keats: An essay on imaginative transmutation', *English Studies*, 46:1–6 (1965), 24; and 'Keys to Kubla Khan', *English Studies*, 44 (1963), 321–41.
  21. Hans Heinrich Meier, 'Ancient Lights on Kubla's Lines', *English Studies*, 46:1–6 (1965), 19.
  22. Robert F. Fleissner, *Sources, Meaning, and Influences of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': Xanadu re-routed: a study in the ways of romantic variety* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2000), p. 5.
  23. G. Wilson Knight, 'Coleridge's Divine Comedy' [1941], in *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 97.
  24. Quotation and diagram: Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 274. The visual similarity between X and K certainly adds to this effect.
  25. This sample includes all existing translations of *Kubla Khan* into French, to which were added three in Spanish, two in Italian and German, and one in Portuguese, Romanian and Russian. Translations of the poem do exist in a number of other languages, including Greek and Japanese, but these exceed the range of my expertise. Three of the translators of *Kubla Khan*, namely Balmont, Darras and Luzi, also are (or were) fine poets in their own right.
  26. *Le Livre de Marco Polo, citoyen de Venise*, ed. by M. G. Pauthier (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1865).
  27. Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles, 'The Shooting Script', in *The Citizen Kane Book*, ed. by Pauline Kael (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 138. Italics mine. Since then, the name Xanadu was given to a number of things and places, including a 1980 Hollywood musical, a bright area on one of Saturn's moons, and a coffee brand, to name but a few.
  28. Jacques Derrida, 'Des tours de Babel', trans. by Joseph F. Graham, in *Psyche. Inventions of the Other*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 197.
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
  30. See Edward Snyder, *Hypnotic poetry: a Study of Trance-inducing Technique in Certain Poems and its Literary Significance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1930), p. 45: 'In the early stages of a hypnotic poem a foreign word, an obscure phrase, or any slight difficulty that causes fatigue from strain on the part of the listener may actually promote the ultimate aesthetic effect at which the artist aims.'
  31. Henri Meschonnic, 'Au commencement', in *Pour la poétique II: Épistémologie de l'écriture poétique de la traduction* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 430.



32. 'Cette traduction sans illusion ni sanction, cette approche délibérément personnelle, ne peut que se savoir un simple moment au sein d'une suite d'autres interprétations du même poème: et ce savoir, ce consentement d'emblée accordé par un traducteur au travail des autres dans les années à venir, instituera ainsi une activité, le traduire. [...] En somme, si chaque traduction est moins que l'original, le *traduire* comme tel, l'activité que l'on peut nommer le traduire, va — nous dit-on — en donner à la longue l'équivalent et même sans doute davantage: ces déchiffrements successifs ayant fait paraître au grand jour un infini de la signifiante que l'auteur, pour sa part, avait réfréné autant que vécu.' Yves Bonnefoy, *La Communauté des traducteurs* (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2000), pp. 24-25.