

On Musicality in Verse: As Illustrated by Some Lines of Coleridge

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Having had occasion to linger over the work of Coleridge, I came upon this problem: There were many passages that seemed to have a marked consistency of texture; yet this effect was not got by some obvious identity of sound, as in alliteration. For instance, the sequence of words, “bathed by the mist,” seemed to justify a bracketing together, as a kind of unified event, for [32] other than purely grammatical reasons. They seemed to have an underlying consistency that gave them an appeal as musicality. The following observations are offered to the Guild, for what they may be worth, as an explanation of such effects.

Let us ground our speculations upon thoroughly orthodox phonetics. If you place the lips in the position to make the sound *m*, from this same position you can make the sounds *b* and *p*. Hence, when looking for a basis of musicality in verse, we may treat *b* and *p* as close phonetic relatives of *m*. The three are all in the same family: they are “cognates.”

Now, if we take into account this close phonetic relationship between *b* and *m* as phonetic cognates, we find that “b— b— the m—” is a *concealed* alliteration. “B— b— the b—” would be blunt, and even relatively tiresome. But in deflecting the third member from a *b* to an *m*, the poet retains the same phonetic theme, while giving us a variation upon this theme. And were “mist” to be replaced by some word beginning with a phonetically disrelated sound, such as *w*, *z*, or *k*, the particular kind of musical bracketing that the poet got here would be lost.

Another orthodox set of cognates is *n*, *d*, *t*, with *d* and *t* bearing the same relation to *n* as *b* and *p* bear to *m*. Thus the *d* in “bathed” and the *t* in “mist” are cognates. So we find that the first and last words of the bracketed sequence both end on members of the *n* family. Or you could make the relationship still more apparent by noting that *d* is but a voiced *t*, and *t* an unvoiced *d*.

The corresponding aspirate of *t* is *th* as in “tooth.” The corresponding aspirate of *d* is *th* as in “this.” Accordingly, the *th* of “bathed” and “the” may be considered as variations upon the sound *d*. [33]

In sum: *n* moves into *d* and *t*; and *d* and *t* move respectively into voiced and unvoiced *th*. The whole design would be a

d—th (voiced, or hard)
n <
t—th (unvoiced, or soft)

Similarly, the *m* family could be designed as

b—v
m <
p—f

If, now, with these designs in mind, we inspect the underlying consonantal structure of “bathed by the mist,” we find that it is composed of two concealed alliterations: one, “b— b— — m—”; the other, “—thd — th— —t.”¹ And I would suggest that the quality of musicality is got here by this use of cognate sounds.

Perhaps, in the line, “Fainting beneath the burthen of their babes,” there is an over-stressing of the *b*’s, though the wide range of shifting among the *n* cognates helps greatly to redeem this effect, as you get *n*, *t*, both voiced and unvoiced *th*, and the *n* nasalized: *ng*. Except for the one *r*, this line contains, as regards consonantal structure, solely cognates of *m* and *n*. (For though the distance from *m* to *f* is great, the distance from *b* to *f* is much closer, since *p* is *b*

unvoiced, and *p* leads directly into *f*. Hence, the *f* in “fainting” is a tenuous variant of the *b* theme.)

The notion of concealed alliteration by cognates seems obvious enough to require no further treatment or illustrations. However, before dropping this aspect of the subject, we might list other phonetic cognates by which the effect could be got. *J* is [34] cognate with *ch* (as voiced and unvoiced members of the same family). Hard *g* is cognate with *k*. And *z* is cognate with *s*, from which we could move to a corresponding aspirate pair, *zh* (as in “seizure”) and *sh*.

We may next note an acrostic structure for getting consistency with variation. In “tyrannous and strong,” for instance, the consonant structure of the third word is but the rearrangement of the consonant structure in the first: *t-r-n-s* is reordered as *s-t-r-ng*. In the line previously quoted, “beneath the burthen” has a similar scrambling: *b-n-th* (unvoiced), *b-th* (voiced) *-n*. Perhaps the most beautiful example of the consonantal acrostic in Coleridge is the line from *Kubla Khan*: “A damsel with a dulcimer,” where you match *d-m-s-l* with *d-l-s-m*-plus *r*.

This acrostic strategy for knitting words together musically is often got by less “pure” scrambling of the consonants. The effect is got by a sound structure that we might name by a borrowing from the terminology of rhetoric: chiasmus, i.e., “crossing.” Chiasmus, as a form in rhetoric, is much more often found in Latin than in English, owing to the greater liberty of word order permissible to Latin. It designates an a-b-b-a arrangement, as were we to match adjective-noun with noun-adjective, for instance: “non-political bodies and the body politic.” This reversal, however, is quite common in music (where the artist quite regularly varies the sequence of notes in his theme by repeating it upside down or backwards)—and the musicality of verse is our subject.

The most effective example of tonal chiasmus I have found happens to be a reversal of vowels rather than consonants: “Dupes of a deep delusion,” which is “*oo* of an *ee ee oo*.” In the consonantal usage, the chiasmus is usually to be discovered [35] by using the theory of cognates. Thus, in “beneath the ruined tower,” the last two words are chiastic in their consonantal reversal, *r—nd t—r* (with *t* as a variant of *nd*). We may thus see why “The ship drove fast” seems so “right” in sound. The surrounding structural frame of “drove” (*d—v*) is reversed in “fast” (*f—t*), with the variation of a shift from the voiced *d* and *v* to the corresponding unvoiced *t* and *f*.

Since we are on the subject of musicality, could we not legitimately borrow another cue from music? I refer to the musical devices known as “augmentation” and “diminution.” Thus, if a theme has been established in quarter-notes, the composer may treat it by augmentation in repeating it in half-notes. And diminution is the reverse of this process. In poetry, then, you could get the effect of augmentation by first giving two consonants in juxtaposition and then repeating them in the same order but separated by the length of a vowel. Thus in

She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,
That slid into my soul

you find the *sl* progression in “sleep,” “slid,” and “soul,” but it is varied in its third appearance by augmentation: *sl, sl, s—l*. (One should also note the many repetitions and variations of sound in “she sent the gentle sleep.”)

As an instance of the contrary process, diminution, we have

But silently, by slow degrees

where the temporal space between the *s* and *l* in “silently” is collapsed in “slow”: *s—l*, *sl*. (Also involved here are an alliterated *b* and colliterated *s*.)

To sum up: we have the repetition of a sound in cognate variation, acrostic scrambling, chiasmus, augmentation, and dim- [36] inution.² If one now applies this whole set of coordinates, one may note the presence of one or several, in different combinations. To select a few examples at random, for trial analysis:

“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan” is found, by reason of the cognate relationship between *n* and *d*, to be much more closely knit, on the phonetic basis, than would otherwise be supposed. One might make this apparent by imagining himself pronouncing the line with a head cold, thus: “Id Xadadu did Kubla Khad.” “Drunken triumph” would be a modified alliteration, with *dr* (voiced) varied as *tr* (unvoiced). “So fierce a foe to frenzy” contains, besides the obvious alliteration, a diminution of the distance between *f—r* in “fierce” and *fr* in “frenzy.” “Beloved from pole to pole” contains a cognate augmentation (that is: voiced *b—l* becomes unvoiced *p—l*, and the temporal distance in pronouncing the *o* of “pole” is greater than that in pronouncing the *e* of “beloved”).

“Terms for fratricide” contains chiasmus and diminution: *t—r*, *f—r*, *fr*, *tr*. “The sails at noon left off their tune” contains a modified repetition of *ft* (in “left” and “off their”), while “noon” and “tune” are not merely internal rhymes, but are constructed of cognates, *n* and *t*. In “dote with a mad idolatry,” the *d—t* of “dote” becomes augmented by a two-syllable interval in “idolatry.” “Midway on the mount” gives us “mount” as cognate variant of “mid.” In “only that film, which fluttered,” you get a diminution [37] from *f—l* to *fl*. In “the minstrelsy that solitude loves best,” we find chiasmus with augmentation, as per the *ls* of “minstrelsy” and the *s—l* of “solitude.”

There is quite a complexity in “steamed up from Cairo’s swamps of pestilence,” where the *s—m* of “steamed” is repeated in “swamps,” while the *ps* of “swamps” is in turn augmented in “pestilence.” In “green light that lingers,” the *g-r-n-l* of “green light” is acrostically reordered as *l-ng-r* in “lingers.” In “the spirit and the power,” you get the temporal distance between the *p* and *r* in “spirit” augmented in “power.” “Luminous mist” gives us *m-n-s*, *m-s-t* (cognate of *n*). “Sleep, the wide blessing” contains “*sl—p* the wide *bl—s*,” which is to say (recalling that *b* and *p* are cognates, 1,2,3 3,2,1).

Coleridge also occasionally used the *ablaut* form (the Hopkins “heaven-haven” kind of punning got by the changing of vowels within a constant consonantal frame) as per his “loud lewd Mirth.” And very frequently he obtained modified consistency by repeating one consonant while varying its partner with a non-cognate variant. Thus: “glimmers with green light”; “fluent phrasemen”; “in green and sunny glade.” “Blooms most profusely” carries this process farther afield, in that the initial alliteration is by cognates, the voiced and unvoiced mutes. An exceptionally complex line of this sort is “blue, glossy green, and velvet black,” where you have *bl*, *gl*, *gr*, *v—l*, *v—t*, *bl*. Here the second and third are paired, with the first consonant of this pair alliterated and the second non-cognately varied—while the *l* of “glossy” appears as a correspondingly placed member in three of the other four pairs: *bl*, *v—l*, *v—t*, *bl*. The *bl* design is augmented, by cognate, in *v—l*. And the design of “glossy green” [38] is augmentatively matched by the design of “velvet,” one member being an alliteration and the second a non-cognate variant. It may be cumbersome to state these manifold interrelationships analytically, but the spontaneous effect can be appreciated, and the interwovenness glimpsed, by anyone who

reads the line aloud without concern with the pattern as here laboriously broken down for the purposes of anatomic criticism.

People to whom I have suggested the use of these co-ordinates (obviously they could be applied to other poets) usually ask me whether I think that Coleridge employed them consciously. I doubt whether it makes much difference. For example, one may sense the well-knittedness of a popular cliché like “team mate” without explicitly noting that its structural solidarity is due, in large measure at least, to the chiasmic progression $t—m\ m—t$. There is an indeterminate realm between the conscious and the unconscious where one is “aware” in the sense that he recognizes a special kind of event to be going on, and yet is not “aware” in the sense that he could offer you an analytic description and classification of this event. The first kind of awareness we might call a consciousness of method, the second a consciousness of methodology. And I presume that we should not attribute the second kind to an artist unless explicit statements by the artist provide us with an authorization. Furthermore, even where such explicit statements are available, we need not describe the awareness as wholly of the methodological sort. Very often in writing, for instance, one is conscious of using a tactic that seems to him like a tactic he had used before (that is, he feels that both instances could be classifiable together on the basis of a method in common). Yet he may sense this kinship quite accurately [39] without necessarily finding for it a corresponding analytic or methodological formulation.

And even if he does arrive at an explicit formulation of his tactic, the fact remains that he developed the tactic and used it with awareness long before this explicit stage was reached (a stage, incidentally, that either may lead him into a more “efficient” exploitation of the method, so that his manner threatens to degenerate into a mannerism, or may start him on the way towards totally new methodical developments: from method, to methodology, to post-methodological method).

In Coleridge’s case, we do have evidence that he was “aware” of his consonantal practices at least to this extent: he was “consonant-conscious.” Thus, in *Table Talk*:

Brute animals have the vowel sounds; man only can utter consonants. It is oatural, therefore, that the consonants should be marked first, as being the framework of the word; and no doubt a very simple living language might be written quite intelligibly to the natives without any vowel sounds marked at all. The words would be traditionally and conventionally recognized, as in shorthand; thus: *Gd crtd th hvn nd th rth*.

In the case of a passage like “my bright and beauteous bride,” I doubt whether any poet or reader is sufficiently innocent of methodological awareness to miss the $b—t, b—t, b—d$ structure of tonality here. As for the chiasmic arrangement, the closest I can come to finding some explicit recognition of its operation is in his sensitivity to reversal of direction in general, as with the turn from “The Sun came up upon the left” to “The Sun now rose upon the right” (the reversal of direction following the crime). “Asra,” his cipher for Sarah Hutchinson, was built acrostically. In “flowers are lovely, love is flowerlike,” the grammatical chiasmus is obviously pointed, while the attendant “fl l-vl, l-v fl-l” structure of “*flowers lovely love flowerlike*” is almost as [40] obtrusive to the ear as the grammatical reversal is to the thought. And we may glimpse methodical concern behind the tide “To the Autumnal Moon,” which is more of an event musically than “To the Autumn Moon” would have been, since the use of the adjective form gives us an augmentation, from mn to $m—n$. (In effect, he explicitly pronounces “moon” once, but implicitly or punningly pronounces it twice.)

In all of the examples and speculations I have offered, I have made no attempt to establish any correlation between musicality and content. The extra burdens I should take on, if I attempted to deal with this controversial realm, would be enormous. Lines like “Black hell laughs horrible—to hear the scoff,” and “Where the old Hag, unconquerable, huge” seem to profit expressionistically by their reliance upon gutturals. But I have here been offering coordinates for the analysis of musicality pure and simple, without concern for the possible expressionistic relation between certain types of tonal gesturing and certain types of attitude.

Notes

1 We could differentiate the second kind by some such word as “colliteration.” Thus, the bracketing, “soft and silent spot,” could be said to alliterate *s* and colliterate *t* (with *t* extended into *nt* in “silent” and into *nd* in “and”).

2 A major factor that has kept a consideration of musical reversion, augmentation, and diminution out of our standard prosodies may be this: That the prosodies have been disposed to confine themselves within the grooves set by Greek-Roman models, and these three devices were not so methodically exploited in Greek and Roman music as in Western music from Bach to Schoenberg. But I do not know enough about early theories of music to be sure that this explanation is correct.