Although debate continues over whether or not the headnote Coleridge published with “Kubla Khan” in 1816 should be regarded as a factual account of the poem’s origin, recent studies have suggested that regardless of its basis in fact the headnote serves most importantly as what Warren Stevenson calls an “imaginative adjunct to the poem” (606). In that context, the headnote can be seen as “a prose imitation of the poem it introduces,” functioning “in part as argument and gloss” (Chayes 4). Such an understanding of the headnote reinforces the view that “Kubla Khan” is a poem about the creative process. To say that certainly is not new, but the reading that follows, while benefiting from those preceding it, differs from them in its interpretation of specific elements in the poem, particularly the function of Kubla Khan.

According to the account given in the headnote, Coleridge sensed that he composed a poem in simultaneous response to a vision seen during “a profound sleep, at least of the external senses” (Poetical Works 296). He asserts that “he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (296). In other words, not only the content (“all the images”), but also the form (“the correspondent expressions”) for the extended poem were simultaneously given during the vision. Together they presented themselves as a fully realized creation in the mind of the sleeping or entranced Coleridge. All that remained for him to do upon waking
was to embody the creation in written form, that is, transfer it from mind to paper, thereby giving it an externalized mode of existence. That, according to the headnote, is exactly what Coleridge set about when he awoke. Having “a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, [he] instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved” (296). Had the act of transferring the “composition” from mind to paper been completed, it would have represented the final but all-important step in the creative process, for externalizing the artist’s conception not only gives it a concrete embodiment, but also makes it accessible to others who can then respond to it as the artist responded. Unfortunately, this last step of the creative process was interrupted by “a person on business from Porlock” who detained Coleridge “above an hour,” after which he found “that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!” (296).

Critics disagree on just how much of the published poem actually reflects the vision. Some maintain that it is only the first two stanzas, the third stanza having been added later as a postscript explaining why the poem could not be finished in its original form (Schneider 247-48). Still others think Coleridge wrote all fifty-four lines between his waking and the interruption (Stevenson 605). Another possibility, supported I think by the headnote, is that the published poem incorporates in the first stanza, which corresponds closely with Purchas His Pilgrimage, the work Coleridge was reading when he fell asleep, the “eight or ten scattered lines and images” committed to paper between Coleridge’s waking and the interruption by the man from Porlock.1 The rest of the poem as published is most probably the result of later composition, for Coleridge claims at the end of the headnote that “from still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him” (297). Thus, realizing that the essence of what would have been a poem of “two to three hundred lines” had been forever lost, Coleridge ended by composing from the surviving fragments a very different poem. Incorporating what had originally been “given to him,” he adapted that to a new purpose suggested by his experience—a poem about the creative process itself.

Although it ostensibly serves only to explain the circumstances surrounding the original but never fully executed conception for an
extended poem, the headnote's real significance lies in what it reveals about the tenuous nature of the creative moment. In that sense, the headnote signals the subject of the poem it introduces and provides a context for reading the poem. Thus, debate over the literal truth of certain details in the headnote, interesting as it may be in terms of Coleridge biography, is not really relevant to an understanding of the poem. What does it matter if Coleridge correctly or incorrectly remembers the year of the original but abortive composition? What does it matter whether the conception came in a "profound sleep," as claimed in the headnote, or in a "sort of Reverie," as claimed in the Crewe MS? Even if the entire headnote were a fabrication, which I do not think it is, it would not significantly change its relationship to the poem. Its function would remain the same; it would still serve to establish a context for reading "Kubla Khan."

II

The landscape described in stanzas one and two of "Kubla Khan" is the usual starting point for any reading of the poem in terms of the creative process. Even if, as I believe, the first stanza basically reflects all that was transcribed of the grand poem conceived during the vision, it nevertheless stands in close relationship with the second stanza, the two forming a unit but differing in focus, as I shall explain later. The relational pattern established in the first two stanzas between the chasm, fountain, river, caverns, and underground sea does suggest the mind and its activities. As Irene Chayes argues, "the landscape with its descending levels would be the mind as structure, and the processes within it, summed up in the flowing of the river, 'meandering with a mazy motion,' the mind as activity" (7). Because some have assumed that Xanadu is a specific element or locale within the landscape to be isolated and identified as merely the enclosure decreed by Kubla Khan (Shelton 35-37), it should be emphasized from the outset that the poem reads "In Xanadu" not "At Xanadu."

Thus, everything described in the first two stanzas is "In Xanadu"—the fountain, chasm, river, caverns, sea, as well as Kubla Khan, his garden and his pleasure-dome. If the landscape reflects the mind and its activities, then Xanadu is the symbolic name for the mind.

The basic structural feature of Xanadu is its circularity, defined by the course of Alph, "the sacred river" (line 3). Rising out of the "deep romantic chasm" (1. 12) amid the turbulent but intermittent gushings of a "mighty fountain" (I. 19) which is its source in the upper or
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visible region of Xanadu, the river flows “with a mazy motion / Through wood and dale” (ll. 25-26) until it reaches “the caverns measureless to man” (l. 27). There it descends “in tumult” (l. 28) into what is called alternately a “sunless sea” (l. 5) or “lifeless ocean” (l. 28), that is, into the lower, hidden region of Xanadu. What I call the visible and hidden regions of Xanadu correspond to the conscious and unconscious realms of the mind, an identification Chayes terms “fundamental to the meaning of the first two stanzas” (7). The course of the river unites those two realms, for as Warren Stevenson points out, “the river presumably returns to the fountain via the sunless sea, like a serpent with its tail in its mouth—the ancient symbol of eternity” (609; see also Gerber 334-35). In so doing, the river both completes and renews its circular flow which then becomes perpetual in its motion. Stevenson’s reference to the ouroboros, a symbol frequently employed by the Gnostics and the alchemists, is quite apropos. In some versions of the symbol, the serpent’s body is half light and half dark, suggesting a basic dichotomy united through the circle. The structure of the Xanadu landscape is analogous in that it encompasses both light and dark, visible and hidden, conscious and unconscious aspects united through the circular course of the river. Because the circular pattern in Xanadu involves motion, it is also analogous in function to the meaning attached to circular motion by the alchemists for whom it signified “that which brings into being, activates and animates all forces in a given process, sweeping them along with it, including those forces which would otherwise act against each other” (Girlot 235). As the basic structural pattern of the Xanadu mind-landscape, circular motion allows depiction of the conscious and unconscious, the measured and measureless aspects co-existing in the mind’s processes. The perpetual, circular course of the river reflects the unity of the diverse and seemingly opposed elements.

Each element within the poem’s mind-landscape must now be more precisely identified. Although I agree with Chayes’s basic interpretation of the landscape’s symbolic meaning, I disagree with her identification of specific elements within the landscape. To identify the fountain in “Kubla Khan” with creativity and say it “corresponds to the imagination in its primary sense” (9-10) goes too far. The fountain is a necessary component for creativity in the poem, but it does not serve as a creative power in any sense that would be analogous to the imagination. If anything, its “ceaseless turmoil seething” suggests something vital but nevertheless chaotic. As the immediate source of the river in the visible or conscious region of
Xanadu, the fountain and the chasm from which it “momently” gushes represent the well-spring through which the unconscious becomes conscious. The fountain-chasm symbolizes the initiating point of conscious thought, depicted as a violent but potentially fertile springing forth from what has been “sunless” and “lifeless,” dark and unformed. Because the passage from the unconscious to the conscious is shrouded in mystery, the place where that passage or birth occurs is appropriately “holy and enchanted” (14), like the originating stage of life itself.

Just as it goes too far to identify the fountain with the imagination in its primary sense, Chayes’s claim that the river “corresponds to the secondary imagination” (10) is unconvincing. Like the fountain, the river is also a necessary condition for creativity in that it presumably fertilizes the ground upon which creation takes place in the poem, but the river itself is not a creative power any more than the fountain is. Nevertheless, even as the fountain is “holy and enchanted,” the river is properly termed “sacred” because it represents the stream of thought; it is the life of the mind, the unifying first principle of all mental activity, signified by its name, Alph. As indicated earlier, the river flows through the conscious realm of Xanadu from a source ultimately rooted in the unconscious to a terminal point that returns it once again to that dark, mysterious region. In contrast to the fountain-chasm, the “caverns measureless to man” (4) represent the initiating point of the unfathomable unconscious, the “sunless” or “lifeless” underground sea. There, the river is seemingly lost as it becomes undifferentiated in the formless sea but only to well up again through the fountain-chasm, ever new yet ever the same.

III

If indeed “Kubla Khan” became, as Coleridge “frequently purposed to finish” the original fragment, a poem about the creative process set in the general context of the mind and its activities, then where, if not in the fountain or the river, is the creative power to be found? What element in the poem corresponds to that “synthetic and magical power” that “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” defined in the *Biographia Literaria* (174) as the imagination? According to Coleridge, the imagination is the mind’s “shaping or modifying power” (*Biographia* 160),5 the “true inward creatrix,” that “instantly out of the chaos of elements or shattered fragments of memory, puts together some form to fit it” (*Anima Poetae* 206). In the poem, that function is best fulfilled by
Kubla Khan himself, for it is he alone who creates in the mind-landscape.

To say that Kubla Khan represents the imagination necessarily rejects previous suggestions that he is “fierce and cruel” (Beer 222), that he resembles an “Augustan gentleman as seen through Romantic eyes” (Watson 28), or that “in the context of the poem Kubla Khan occupies a relatively limited place” (Chayes 5). Even though he is neither a symbol of God nor of “Mankind” (Suther 189), his role in the poem is all-important, a point reinforced by the very title of the poem, and recognized by Knight (93) and House (120) before me. As the mind’s creative power, Kubla Khan is a reflection of the divine in man, what Coleridge calls “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (Biographia 167). As the imagination, Kubla Khan resides in the mind—“In Xanadu”—and there he creates the visions that must then be embodied in art.

Kubla Khan’s creation best justifies his identification as the imagination. Considered in its totality, his creation reflects a triple structure, and Coleridge would have known that three is the Pythagorean number signifying completion and the synthesis of opposing elements (Cirlot 222). At the center of Kubla’s creation stands the pleasure-dome with its opposing elements of sun and ice unified into what is later called “a miracle of rare device” (l. 35). Surrounding the dome and forming the second of the three structural divisions are “gardens bright with sinuous rills” (l. 8) and “forests ancient as the hills” (l. 10). Like the sun and ice of the dome, the gardens and forests reflect opposing elements, the gardens suggesting the ordered, cultivated, and artificial and the forests the free, untamed, and natural. Yet, despite their opposition, both seem to blend harmoniously in their “here” and “there” placement around the dome. They are further unified by the third structural division of Kubla’s creation, for the gardens and forests are in turn “with walls and towers … girdled round” (7). Even this third division reflects a union of opposites, the walls representing the horizontal and the towers the vertical or even perhaps the feminine and masculine respectively. Some have speculated that the outer enclosure of walls and towers forms a square or rectangle (Suther 242; Woodring 362-63), but the words “girdled round” suggest that even this portion is circular in shape. Imagistically, Kubla’s entire creation could be said to resemble a domed, three-tiered crown, the walls and towers forming the outer circlet. As such, the creation emblems Kubla’s crowning achievement: his transmutation of opposing elements into a unified whole symbolizing perfection. As described in the first stanza, the creation reflects the
shaping and modifying, the balancing and reconciling power of imagination, not, as Chayes argues, the mere "work of the arranging and ornamenting fancy" (8). The idea of achieved perfection is further implied by the "twice five miles" occupied by the total creation (a dimension I take as referring to the diameter of the whole circular structure), for ten is the Pythagorean number that raises all things to unity and is considered the number of perfection (Cirlot 223).

In addition to denigrating Kubla himself, some critics have faulted his creation because its purpose is pleasure, but that reflects an underestimation of the positive connotation Coleridge attached to the word when used in the context of poetry or art in general. As the product of Kubla's decree, the circular, tripartite enclosure should be understood as a unified artistic conception, reflecting both completeness and perfection in the relation of its parts to each other and to the whole. As such, it symbolizes a potential work of art, or, more particularly, a potential poem. In terms of Coleridge's own definition, pleasure must necessarily be one of its essential attributes:

"A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part. (Biographia 172)"

Thus, pleasure or delight is the first or immediate object of a poem, and Kubla's creation would fulfill that requirement. Nothing in the poem qualifies the word "pleasure" in any negative way, nor should the word be contrasted with "delight" in stanza three. As the passage from the Biographia suggests, Coleridge uses the two words interchangeably in the context of art, and the same holds true for their usage in "Kubla Khan."

I have said that Kubla Khan's creation symbolizes a potential poem. As described in the first two stanzas, the creation exists only "In Xanadu"; it has yet to be given the final mode of existence that would make it a work of art in the true sense. All of the balancing and reconciling of opposing elements in the creation, which reflect the power of imagination, are effected through Kubla's decree. One gets the impression that "In Xanadu" Kubla's decree gives immediate existence to the creation—the dome, the gardens and forests, the walls and towers. That impression is reinforced if the first two lines of
the poem are compared with Coleridge's recollection of the passage he was reading from Purchas His Pilgrimage at the moment he fell into his "profound sleep." As given in the headnote, the passage supposedly read "'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built'" (296). In other words, Kubla ordered it, and the palace was built, presumably by others. However, in the poem, "commanded ... to be built" becomes "did ... decree" (1-2). No mention is made of building in stanza one. It is as if Kubla decrees and, by fiat of that decree, the thing instantly exists. The act of building is unnecessary "In Xanadu" because the imagination is a "synthetic and magical power" which "instantly out of the chaos of elements ... puts together some form to fit it." Significantly, the only reference to building in the poem comes later in stanza three, and there it is the "I" who proclaims he "would build that dome in air" (46). I think the hiatus between the "decree" of stanza one and the "build" of stanza three is crucial to an understanding of the poem as a metaphorical expression of the mind's creative process. Without the actual step of building, which implies precisely the "consciousness of effort" Coleridge maintains was missing during the "composition" evoked by the vision, Kubla's creation has only a conceptual reality in Xanadu. As evidenced in the second stanza, that reality is tenuous. Whereas the first stanza focuses on Kubla's creation itself, the second stanza focuses on that creation in relation to the surrounding landscape, particularly the river. Chayes has argued that the course of the river in the second stanza "must be understood as on a second circuit" (11), but I see no compelling reason why that must be so. Both stanzas can be seen as providing different perspectives on a single moment—the moment of Kubla's decree and the resulting creation. The instant Kubla's creation came into existence, it would be reflected on the river, and that is how it is seen in the second stanza. Because its reflection is projected midway on the waves between the "ceaseless turmoil" of the fountain and the "tumult" of the caverns leading to the "lifeless ocean," Kubla's creation has an uncertain reality in relation to the river:

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The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves. (31-34)
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Although it presumably fertilized the ground where Kubla's creation came to be, the river merely allows the "shadow" of that creation to be
reflected back on itself, the only reality assigned to Kubla's work in stanza two, and a rather insubstantial reality it is. The stream of thought supplies imagination with the "fertile ground" upon which to exercise its "synthetic and magical power," and it simultaneously serves as the mirror upon which the imagination projects or reflects its creation, thereby giving it a conscious but not a concrete reality. That reality is not only shadowy or conceptual, but also temporary or impermanent because the reflection is projected "midway on the waves" at a point of momentary equipoise, manifested as a "mingled measure" between "turmoil" and "tumult." The next "momently" eruption from the fountain will propel the river on its way toward the caverns. The "mingled measure" or equipoise will be disrupted and the shadow-reflection of the "miracle of rare device" carried away and soon dissolved, just as in the headnote Coleridge had said of the original vision that "all had passed away like images on a stream into which a stone has been cast." Because the river is moving toward the caverns that lead to the formless sea of the unconscious, it is appropriate that from there Kubla hears "Ancestral voices prophesying war" (30). Those voices are the harbingers of the destruction and dissolution awaiting the shadow of his creation as the river carries its image toward the descent into the unconscious. The voices are "Ancestral" because they represent recollection of past losses even as they foretell the one that is about to occur.

If stanza one begins with creation, stanza two ends with impending destruction. Together the first two stanzas parallel in symbolic terms the argument of the headnote. Although the actual dissolution of Kubla's creation is not depicted in the poem, use of the past tense in the first two stanzas confirms that the prophesied destruction took place. As Woodring points out, "the poem speaks of the dome and pleasure-grounds uniformly in the past tense. The dome was; it is no longer. Something greater ... has destroyed it" (363). That "something greater" is the powerful current of the mind's complex thought processes which foster both creation and destruction. The power of imagination is, as Coleridge once acknowledged, "a dim Analogue of Creation" (Letters 2: 1034). Unlike the infinite Creator, the imagination is finite in power, its creations subject to what Coleridge calls "the flux and reflux" (Biographia 268) of the mind which, like a kaleidoscope, always changes. Thus, the creation of stanza one is a floating shadow in stanza two, and both have been lost in the passage of time.
IV

The only counter against the implied loss is missing from the first two stanzas, but it is recognized and celebrated in stanza three, an integral part of the poem's metaphor, not a mere postscript. As Chayes argues, stanza three is a corrective stanza, but it does not reflect a "new creative process" (17) at work in the poem itself. The third stanza is corrective in that it suggests what should have been the final stage of the creative process begun in stanza one with Kubla's decree. Addressing the question of the relation of stanza three to the rest of the poem, Stevenson says that "What Coleridge has done is leave a rhetorical gap between conception and execution" (629). The sense of such a gap is reinforced, as I suggested earlier, by the hiatus between Kubla's decree, representing conception, and any reference to building, corresponding to what Stevenson calls execution. Preservation of the imagination's conceptions from the "flux and reflux" threatening their destruction demands that they be built, that is, somehow embodied or externalized, thereby giving them concrete reality outside the mind. Only when it is built or executed does an imaginative conception move from a potential to an actual work of art. The picture must be painted, the statue sculpted, the poem written to be considered finally as fully realized works of art. In other words, the artist must act on the conception; there must be "consciousness of effort," reflecting what Coleridge calls imagination "co-existing with the conscious will" (Biographia 167). Through an effort of will, the artist can, as it were, rescue the conception and give it an external form through art. That finalizing step is the subject of stanza three.

The vision of the damsel with the dulcimer singing of Mt. Abora symbolizes the artist in the act of executing what has been conceived or created. Because this vision is also from the past, it may reflect Coleridge's own past achievements, but more likely it represents those of artists in general that serve as models or examples for the "I" of stanza three. As depicted, the damsel gives outward expression to her own inner vision or imaginative conception in "symphony and song." In so doing, she transmits her conception and awakens in those who hear a responding sense of pleasure or delight. Together her "symphony and song" is analogous to the written poem, the symphony or underlying melody corresponding to the poem's rhythm or meter and the song to its words or images, both combined as a unified expression that embodies and externalizes the inner conception.8

The "I" of stanza three is the poet recognizing the need to bridge
the gap between conception and execution, between the decree and the building. To that end, he would follow the damsel's example:

Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air;  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice! (42-47)

The union of symphony and song, meter and word, form and content would allow the poet to execute Kubla's decree by building the "dome in air." However, the conditional "Could I ... I would" does not mean that the "I" of the poem can or will be able to do so, but the very recognition of what would follow could he in fact revive the power of expression closes the poem with what Stevenson calls "a triumphant affirmation of the divine potentialities of poetry" (629; also House 116). Thus, the final emphasis in the poem falls on the effects that would be produced on those who hear the poet's own music/poem. If only conditionally, the creative process has been carried to its completion within the poem itself.

Thus, the original poem begun but never finished becomes finally a poem about the creative process, symbolically depicting the unexpressed fragility of the original conception while at the same time affirming the powerful effect of that conception when built or expressed through the efforts of the poet's conscious will working in tandem with imagination. Of course, the great irony is the poem produced from the fragment of the initial failure. If the original conception decreed by the imagination was lost in the "lifeless ocean" of Coleridge's unconscious after the interruption by the "person on business from Porlock," subsequent pulsations from the fountain supplied his imagination with new "elements or shattered fragments of memory" sufficient for a new conception, allowing Coleridge himself to overcome the conditional terms used in stanza three and actually build the dome "in air." The published poem is a finished work about a fragment. The three stanzas of the published poem reflect in their own "symphony and song" the lost tripartite creation once decreed by Kubla Khan in the Xanadu of the poet's mind.

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NOTES

1 Although Chayes also believes that if "any portion of 'Kubla Khan' was actually composed during the 'reverie' (not sleep) acknowledged in the note to the Crewe MS., or was in Coleridge's mind when he wrote his later prose myth of composition by vision, it might well have been this stanza" (9), I cannot accept her contention that stanza one reflects "a relatively low level" (8) of creative power corresponding to the work of fancy rather than imagination. Schneider's study of the complex metrics in stanza one tends to support my hypothesis that if it is basically the "eight or ten" line remnant from the original vision, then Coleridge incorporated the remnant in a polished form as a unified stanza in the poem we now have. See Schneider, Chapter 5.

2 Schneider has disputed Coleridge's claim that the poem was composed in 1797 and argues for a later date (153-237). For evidence supporting Coleridge's claim, see Chambers (78-80). I believe critics too readily fault Coleridge's memory of dates. In that regard, see my study on "Pantisocracy."

3 Two recent studies focus on details suggesting that Coleridge, either consciously or unconsciously, had specific locales in mind as he composed "Kubla Khan." Piper argues that "the poem evokes not one paradise but two, Paradise Lost and Paradise Restored, and that a great deal of the other imagery of the poem, though not paradisal, probably arose out of Coleridge's reading and meditation on the theme of the two Paradises. Indeed even their geography plays an important part in the landscape and structure of the poem" (148). Stelzig has argued that the landscape in "Kubla Khan" matches that of an actual place called the Valley of Rocks near Linton on the seacoast, a place Coleridge had visited with Hazlitt (316-18).

4 For further discussion of the symbolism of alchemy, see Jung.

5 This and the preceding expression more consistently reflect Coleridge's idea of the imagination than does the famous distinction between primary and secondary imagination that appears only in chapter 13 of the Biographia. As early as 1802, Coleridge speaks in a letter of the imagination as "the modifying and co-adunating Faculty" (Letters 2: 866).

6 Recently, Goodson has suggested more specifically that "the 'deep romantic chasm' becomes identifiably genital with the appearance of the wailing woman, and it finds its differand in Kubla's 'pleasure-dome,' which assumes a phallic aspect" (418).

7 According to Woodring, "the pleasures of Kubla and his dome, real enough to a utilitarian materialist, are reduced by contrast with the 'deep delight' in which the poet, once again inspired, would build the dome and caves of ice imaginatively 'in air.' ... Like the baron in Christabel, the khan may be a pleasant chap; he is no poet. He sought pleasure; the poet gives delight" (363). I cannot see sufficient evidence in the poem to support Woodring's contrast between "pleasure" and "delight."

8 Sgammato offers an interesting gloss on the word "symphony," suggesting that it refers to a musical instrument, that is, the dulcimer played by the Abyssinian maid (303-06).
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