Coleridge’s conversation poems extend the conventions of dramatic soliloquy to an apparently autonomous lyrical form.\(^1\) Dramatic soliloquy and poetic monologue both generate illusions of individual speech, yet the difference in genre has decisive implications. In the dramatic context, soliloquy retains mimetic pretensions as part of a represented world, while the written conversation poem tends to draw attention to its own representational illusion. The poetic monologist is typically less concerned to describe the world than to reflect on the experiences that constitute it.

Coleridge, whose finest lyrics are representative of the Romantic monologue, writes most enthusiastically of Shakespeare’s genius in connection with the great soliloquist, Hamlet. Perhaps because Coleridge identifies with Hamlet, monological forms characterize his strongest poems. Although the conversation poem does not inherently carry abnormal associations, the solitude it implies creates an opening for the aberrations of “phantom magic.” Coleridge further develops the conversational mode suggested by Shakespearean so-

\(^1\)The conversation poems also draw from traditions of songs and sonnets, but these earlier first-person forms rarely pretend to capture a particular moment and setting in time and space. John Donne’s poems include notable exceptions. Shakespeare’s sonnets characteristically imply a generalized, nonspecific present. Coleridge’s conversational tone finds a significant echo in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.”
Coleridge’s Conversational Pretense

liloquy and Augustan poetry and clusters a set of related poems around supernatural phenomena.

The rise and fall of Coleridge’s conversational pretense may be traced as a fictional biography, from his identification with Hamlet, through “The Eolian Harp” and “Frost at Midnight,” until the subversion of the conversational mode by “Kubla Khan.” The multiple voices of “Kubla Khan” disrupt the scene of vision, revealing a potential threat to composition. If Coleridge’s early poetry succeeds by virtue of its firm control of the conversational tone, his more radical lyrics disturb the poetic voice that had been established.

Coleridge’s “Hamlet”

Coleridge’s identification with Hamlet provides a key to his poetic form: while Collins, Cowper, and Young are more immediate precursors, Coleridge makes the meditative Hamlet his imaginative model. Returning year after year to the figure of Hamlet, Coleridge both characterizes him in general and attempts to grasp the secret of his soliloquies. Admiration is tempered by awareness of Hamlet’s failure and deterioration; Coleridge uneasily recognizes himself in Hamlet, and fears the imbalances that accompany imaginative excess. After carefully interpreting Hamlet’s soliloquies, Coleridge observes that “such a mind as Hamlet’s is near akin to madness.”

He affirms, yet fears, their kinship.

The Marginalia to the text of Hamlet provide an opportunity of reading, as it were, over Coleridge’s shoulder. In one note dated January 7, 1819, Coleridge states Hamlet’s central importance for his own career: “Hamlet was the play, or rather Hamlet himself was the character in the intuition and exposition of which I first made my turn for philosophical criticism, and especially for insight into the genius of Shakespeare, noticed” (SC I, 16). Coleridge notices Hamlet “especially for insight into the genius of Shakespeare,” leaving ambiguous whether “genius” refers to Shakespeare’s creative powers or to his mind. Hamlet is, for Coleridge, both an exemplary expression

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of Shakespearean dramatic method and a reflection of Shakespeare himself. In Hamlet, the style and psychology of genius come together.

"I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so," Coleridge hazards to confess in the Table Talk of June 24, 1827. He describes Hamlet's character as "the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the practical," just as he had earlier referred to Hamlet's "predominant idealism" and "ratiocinative meditativeness" (SCI, 22). Coleridge admires "Shakespeare's mode of conceiving characters out of his own intellectual and moral faculties," and insistently returns to "The Character of Hamlet" (SC I, 34). He accepts the dramatic illusion and discerns the cause of Hamlet's excesses: the outward and the inward fail to balance.

A Lecture of 1812 asks, "What then was the point to which Shakespeare directed himself in Hamlet?" Coleridge's response elaborates the dialectics of self-presentation: "He intended to pourtray [sic] a person, in whose view the external world, and all its incidents and objects, were comparatively dim, and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only, when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind" (SC II, 150). Shakespeare projects himself onto Hamlet, who in turn reflects the world "in the mirror of his mind." Yet Coleridge's interest in Hamlet is similar to Hamlet's interest in the world, as a reflection of himself. Furthermore, Coleridge's account of the "mirror of the mind" hints at Richard III's impulse to view his "shadow in the sun" (Richard III, I.i.26; cp. I.ii.262-63), which unites psychology and performance. Coleridge does not only allude to the narcissism of perception that is reflected in an internal mirror, a displacement of the tabula rasa. He alludes to Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity" and the final lines in the poem "I wandered lonely as a cloud" when he comments that "Hamlet beheld external things in the same way that a man of vivid imagination, who shuts his eyes, sees what has previously made an impression on his organs" (SC II, 150). But Coleridge's perceptual afterimage is a reflection of Shakespeare or Hamlet.

While he enthusiastically praises Hamlet, Coleridge never dissimulates the identification by which he discovers himself in Shakespeare's genius. He claims a basic affinity with Hamlet; his interpretations equally invent a Hamlet who has more than a smack

3Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: George Routledge, 1884), 56.
of Coleridge. Reflecting on him, Coleridge finds the locus of interest in Hamlet's existence to be a "mirror of his mind," a mirror that reflects its interpreter and catches the projection of its creator. The hall of mirrors superimposes images of Shakespeare, Hamlet, and Coleridge. But by attending to the personal image of his precursor, Coleridge conceals his debt to Hamlet's characteristic form, the soliloquy, the starting point of Coleridge's poetic strength.

The Scene and Moment of Monologue

Coleridge's first literary successes, the conversation poems, are like Shakespearean soliloquies that have been freed from dramatic form. Coleridge obliquely transposes a set of conventions already centuries old. Coleridge's conversation poems are continuous with a more recent mode to the extent that they are "in the Augustan vein." Yet Coleridge's conversation poems dissimulate their poetic nature—unlike the excessively "poetic" poems of Gray, Collins, and Cowper. Far closer to theatrical soliloquy, the conversation poems set a scene that takes the place of dramatic context. Coleridge's first-person speakers become the center of an implicit, unwritten drama.

"Conversation poem" is first of all an oxymoron. Conversations are not poems, nor are poems conversations. All pretense, the conversation poem creates a fictional scene in which a persona "speaks." The entire scenario is an illusion generated by poetic "voice," and Coleridge's conversation poems characteristically reveal their deception by wandering toward imaginative extremes. The fictive conversational voice returns to the initial scene only after following Hamlet's example and engaging in flights of fancy.

Coleridge's conversation poems work as invocations of presence, where the imagination acts as muse to invoke the poetic voice. "The Eolian Harp," according to one contemporary critic, "collapses in a self-surrender that augurs badly for the Imagination." Yet Coleridge's early poetic monologues succeed precisely through their presentation of a poetic voice, a feigned presence that redirects the conventions

of Shakespearean drama. Coleridge introduces novel conventions to create poems that "affect not to be poetry."

"The Eolian Harp," in *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), was originally entitled "Effusion XXXV, Composed August 20th, 1795, at Clevedon, Somersetshire." The title links the scene of composition with that of the poetic persona, insisting that the poem be read as a kind of lived soliloquy. But the details of time and place only conceal the poem's literary pretense. The actual date and location of composition are not necessarily relevant to the imaginary scene of a monological speaker.6

On the surface, "The Eolian Harp" cannot be considered a monologue. The conversational voice addresses another person, as does the speaker in Shakespeare's sonnets, but within an explicit scene of discourse. What scene of dialogue does the poetic voice project? Peculiarities of the conversational pretense become obvious as soon as we attempt to specify the mode of speech it purports to represent. This is an odd scene in which apparently not a single word is spoken aloud (except perhaps those suggested by EH 52–54). By means of direct address and synecdoche, the opening lines describe and create a pose of intimacy: "My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined / Thus on mine arm." The "I" addresses Sara either silently within an imaginary scene or imaginatively within a scene of writing. Coleridge activates a variety of illusions, freed from dramatic forms, such that the monologue hovers ambiguously between represented imagination (the poem's speaker is silently together with Sara) and imagined representation (the poem's author writes of himself and Sara). Verbless, indefinite in time, the words present a reciprocal contact in which there can be no final distinction between literary and real personae.

At all levels of illusion, the scene expands from the point of intimate contact to the lovers' surroundings. Spatial description combines with a hint at the recent past:

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mmost soothing sweet it is
To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o’ergrown
With white-flowered Jasmin, and the broad-leav’d Myrtle,
(Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)
And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,
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Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve
Serenely brilliant (such should Wisdom be)
Shine opposite!

[EH 2–9]

The sunset reflects the speaker's fantasy in a "soothing sweet" mood that finds sadness and serenity in nature. The following lines turn from sky to earth and from vision to smell and sound:

How exquisite the scents
Snatch'd from yon bean-field! and the world so hushed!
The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
Tells us of silence.

[EH 9–12]

A homonymic play confuses worldly "scents" with subjective "sense," for the speaker cannot separate the language that represents objective scents from language that presents subjective sense. The demonstrative phrase, "yon bean-field," like "Thus" in line 2, signals the presupposed scene of intimacy. Exquisite scents (and sense) lead to a proclamation of "the world so hushed!" Paradoxically, the poetic voice refers to the "murmur of the distant Sea" that "tells us of silence." A sound, when written, bears silence. Coleridge's conversational voice is like the sea's murmur that speaks a silent communication.

The subsequent description of the Lute is a figure of poetic imagination. The wind harp stands as an emblem for the entire poem:

And that simplest Lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!
How by the desultory breeze caressed,
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover.

[EH 12–15]

According to the familiar Romantic image, the poetic speaker should identify with the Lute as the muse plays upon his imagination. But images mirror each other as the harp's solo reverses the scene of the poem. In the figured reversal, Sara becomes associated with the Lute, which is "like some coy maid half yielding to her lover." Figurative development gradually detaches the speaker from his initial scene; the metaphorical relation further transforms the speaker's words into
a natural breeze that caresses Sara. In a sense, the speaker takes the place of his muse.

Four moments of imaginative abstraction increasingly distance the poetic speaker from the initial scene (EH 17–25, 26–33, 34–43, 44–48) until Sara interrupts. Exclamations of pretended emotion characterize the speaker’s monologue. The direction of causation is reversed, however, as an elaborate fantasy within fantasy returns the speaker to the Lute:

And thus, my Love! as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst through my half-clos’d eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquillity;
Full many a thought uncall’d and undetain’d,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

[EH 34–43]

At first, the Lute sounds in the silence of the poetic scene; finally, the Lute reappears within an imaginative context, as a figure for the “idle flitting phantasies” that “traverse my indolent and passive brain.” The poetic mind becomes an object of description, while the Lute becomes subject—to tropological modification.

Following several acceptable images, the poetic voice indulges in an excess. The fiction of the scene makes Sara’s “more serious eye” the source of correction, calling the speaker back from visions of the “inward eye.” The infraction is not so much that of “vain Philosophy” as of abstraction from acceptable theology. Sara’s response, apparently as silent as the poetic fantasy, also calls the speaker back to her, “Meek Daughter in the family of Christ” (EH 53). The speaker learns that God is not an appropriate object of fantasy. At his most literal, then, the speaker addresses Sara by placing her in a religious tradition. He further revalues the silence that opens the poem when he discovers that “never guiltless may I speak of him / The Incomprehensible” (EH 58–59). Multiple pretenses allow a fictional present to be infused by intimations of diverse absences; monologue as a poetic device suggests a scene of imaginary address.

The imagery of “Frost at Midnight,” in contrast to the spatial im-
agery of the poem that purports to have been "Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire," works through temporal fantasies toward the strengthened illusion of monological presence. The midnight speaker weaves together past reminiscences, the present moment, and future anticipations. Invoked presences intersect at midnight, a meeting of yesterday, today, tomorrow. "Frost at Midnight" also creates the illusion of a solitude more radical than that of "The Eolian Harp," for the speaker only addresses his sleeping child. Neither speaker appears entirely alone, but as the speaker of "Frost at Midnight" observes,

The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings.

[FM 4–6]

"Frost at Midnight" is comparable to a Shakespearean soliloquy without theatrical context. The drama of internal turmoil or "abstruser musing" animates Coleridge's conversation poems, as when a mysterious natural scenario opens the midnight monologue:

The Frost performs its secret ministry
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.

[FM 1–3]

The "secret ministry" of frost eludes perception, apparently creating ex nihilo. At this troubled moment, no imaginative wind activates poetic creation, whether figured as eolian melodies or as ice crystals. By projection or identification, frost at midnight is also the poet at midnight; the poem works through the speaker's effort to achieve reassurance through figuration. Whereas the speaker of "The Eolian Harp" is inspired by his surroundings, the speaker of "Frost at Midnight" experiences difficulties that equally derive from his environment:

'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange

7 I shall cite "Frost at Midnight" (henceforth FM) from Coleridge's Poetical Works, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge.
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams!

[FM 8–13]

Solitude at first "suits / Abstruser musings," but excessive calm "disturbs / And vexes meditation." Starting from the mysterious rite of natural creation, the poetic voice presents the corresponding human form of imaginative creation, linked to nature by the relation of father and son. The speaker is unsettled by an uncanny presence: "'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs / And vexes meditation." An indefinite "it" eludes comprehension, and the speaker falls into baffled repetition of "sea, and hill, and wood." Negative description of the "numberless" and "inaudible" surroundings press the speaker toward paralysis until he invents a presence, like the Lute, that initiates further poetic development.

The speaker, who like Coleridge's Hamlet seeks reflections of his own mind, makes an ash in his fireplace into a "companionable form":

the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

[FM 13–23]

Coleridge is aware that the "idling Spirit" has a propensity to interpret as an "Echo or mirror seeking of itself." Poetic creation is also, for such a speaker, the activity of a voice that seeks realization through poetry.

If "The Eolian Harp" operates by figurative abstraction to fantastic imagery, "Frost at Midnight" works backward and forward in time to establish the continuity between father and son. Like the opening of "The Eolian Harp," stanza 3 addresses another:
Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
Fill up the interspersed vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!

The child's breathing, unlike Sara's reproving glance, is a sheer rhetorical bridge between "the interspersed vacancies / And momentary pauses of the thought." The speaker identifies with the film on the grate; then, recognizing the arbitrariness of this figurative identification, he establishes a more "natural" trope, in which his son acts to fuse past, present, and future. No interruption curtails the processes of fantasy:

it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain.

The speaker of "The Eolian Harp" loses sight of Sara, but the speaker of "Frost at Midnight" makes the "Dear Babe" central to his imaginative affirmation. In a sense, the child becomes the speaker's inspiring "breeze." The final stanza projects further into the future, at the same time that a rhetorical device completes the circle, returning to the first line and present of the poem:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
...whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

The troubling "secret ministry" is redefined in service to a poetic trance that dominates the naturalistic imagery. The midnight scene
becomes a place of creation, with icicle poems created in the light of the moon.

Coleridge writes soliloquies that continue, and yet finally abscond from, the dramatic tradition. The conversation poem feigns representational space and time in order to present a situated, lyrical monologue. Ultimately, the written form of conversational poetry only feigns to be voice, but the imaginative representation of presences can create a compelling illusion of the speaking subject. If the conversation poem pretends not to be poetry, it aims at the pretense of a speaking subject whose imagination transposes private experience into an accessible poetic form.

Voices of Decay

"Kubla Khan," the culmination of Coleridge's conversation poems, both employs and destroys the conversational mode. Replete with exclamations that indicate a presumed immediacy of feeling, Coleridge's strongest short poem no longer begins with a corresponding, intimate scene. Rather than present a scene of intimacy as the point of departure for imaginative wanderings, "Kubla Khan" opens with a fantastic landscape of Xanadu. The speaker's present is initially an absence from the poem, a lack that Coleridge's preface counters by describing the conditions of composition. But Coleridge presents a most peculiar scene of composition, in which the words of the poem purportedly accompany private imagery of a dream. On one level, the conversation poems strive to represent commonplace domestic situations, while "Kubla Khan" breaks off its elaborate fantasy in conjunction with a threat of madness.

The prose preface operates as do the opening lines of "The Eolian Harp" and "Frost at Midnight," delineating a place and time of creative activity. Whereas the conversation poems only implicitly represent the moment of writing in their scenes of monologue, the preface explicitly discusses the genealogy of "Kubla Khan." Narrating a scene of interruption, the preface fosters the conception of "Kubla Khan" as "a vision in a dream" that has been only partially recovered by waking memory.

Although prefaces are conventionally more literal than poems, critics have doubted the accuracy of Coleridge's autobiographical data.
Coleridge’s Conversational Pretense

A naive reading wishes to accept the preface as an accurate description of the scene of composition, while a more sober reading concludes that it is unreliable. If we recognize preface and poem as equal literary fictions, however, neither half of Coleridge’s double text merits special status. Both preface and poem voice a pseudoautobiographical “I,” a parallel that unsettles the facile dichotomy between prose and verse as literal (or referential) and figurative (or fictional). Preface and poem unsettle the conventional notions of representational correspondence in different genres. Too marvelous for strict autobiography, but not too literal for fiction, the preface need not depend on a pretension to autobiographical truth.

The preface, “Of the Fragment of Kubla Khan,” insistently refers to “the following fragment,” emphasizing a part-whole relationship between present words and some unspecified totality. Coleridge denies independent status to the poem “Kubla Khan,” perhaps because it breaks the familiar pattern of the conversation poems. The synecdoche is accompanied by a perspectivizing allusion to “a poet of great and deserved celebrity,” whose estimation of the poem contrasts the author’s. Is the fragment great or small, heavy or light? “Fragments” also “vaulted like rebounding hail” in line 21 of the poem, before compared with “chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail.” The ground of this literary fragment shows itself to be as unsteady as are the fragments in “that deep romantic chasm” and will not support weightier pretensions. The fragment is published, “as far as the Author’s own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits” (Pr. 1). The request of Lord Byron, whose fame appears secure, provides ground for publication, even if not on the basis of “poetic merits.”

If “Kubla Khan” is a “psychological curiosity,” the preface further insists on the authenticity of its narrative by citing purportedly real chronology and geography (Pr. 2). Yet Coleridge discusses the poem’s “Author” at a distance suggested by the third-person form. The language of cause and effect, illness and cure, add to an impression of

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10I cite the preface (“Pr.”) by sentence number and the poem (“KK”) by line number as they appear in Coleridge’s Poetical Works, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge.
necessity in the narrated events: "In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in 'Purchas's Pilgrimage': 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall' " (Pr. 3-4). The author reads Kubla's command at the moment when a drug induces sleep, allowing him to evade the problems of conscious borrowing. The poem's allusions are thus casually ascribed to the influence of a virtually unconscious reading rather than to a controlled act of writing. Purchas' words appear to ground Coleridge's fragment more firmly than do "poetic merits." Sleep further frees the author from responsibilities associated with deliberate action: "The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses" (Pr. 5). If Coleridge as dreamer does not consciously control the act of composition, an external-internal opposition gives his creativity the appearance of self-generation.

By describing a three-stage procedure, Coleridge effectively traces "Kubla Khan" to a creative act based on unconscious processes.

Step 1, dream composition, is also not composition, because the author "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" (Pr. 5). Can that be called composition "in which all the images rose up before him as things'? The previous images of "substance," "ground," and "fragment" suggest an affinity between physical and textual realities; here the extraordinarily substantial images may be either visual or poetic. The visionary moment is itself presumably extralinguistic, because Coleridge writes of a "parallel production of the correspondent expressions." Simultaneous with but not equivalent to the images, the correspondent expressions appear as if naturally or necessarily linked to what they express. Although words suggest themselves in parallel, the narrator indicates that the unusually concrete images are his primary impression. In contrast to this claim, the underlying poetic meaning of "images" keeps his "vision" in literary bounds from the start. The ambiguous "image" begins to
undo the primary claim of an effortless vision that naturally gives rise to correspondent expressions.

Step 2, transcription of the dream composition, follows immediately, when the author "appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved" (Pr. 6). The instantaneous impulse to write implies that the poetic lines precisely reproduce the dreamed expressions. Unlike the prolonged dream period of "about three hours," the secondary scene of writing condenses into an instant. There is no need to judge whether the fifty-four crafted lines of "Kubla Khan" could actually be instantly or automatically composed: Coleridge's claim to a later, synchronic "recollection of the whole" is an aspect of his double text. The alleged instantaneous scene of writing strives to unify the diachronic process during which "all the images rose up before him as things." This moment captures the dream sequence as a simultaneous order, admitting no break until the author completes "the lines that are here preserved.""11

Step 3, interruption, occurs as suddenly as does the transcription. The "moment" of reading already appears in sentence 3 when the author "fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence." The necessity of a secondary act of reading, or dream interpretation, shows itself with the event of interruption. The published preface eludes any intimation of deliberate craft, however, by reducing the time interval to a moment: "At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock,

11A manuscript note unpublished until 1934 calls into question the claim to a genetic unity of "Kubla Khan." It similarly raises questions about the conscious intentions of a drugged subject but makes steps 1 and 2 appear to form part of the same process, for "a sort of Reverie" is contemporaneous with the act of composition: "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock & Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797." Probably written long before the Preface of 1816, this note is cited by Schneider, Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Khan, 24–25. In discussing the double text of "Kubla Khan" as published, rather than the "facts" of its composition, we do not need to take the manuscript note into consideration. But the earlier, less extravagant version interestingly contrasts the dualistic account of a dream followed by recollection; steps 1 and 2 appear to take place simultaneously. The preface narrator emphasizes an immediate "vision" that is directly accompanied by a corresponding voice; "This fragment... composed in a sort of Reverie" only grammatically omits the speaker ("I") from his act of composition and leaves the possibility of deliberate creation.
and detained by him above an hour” (Pr. 7). The dream and period of detainment both have measurable durations, but the transcription seems to break off in the midst of its lightning-fast burst. The preface subsequently refers to “the vision” retrospectively; on returning to his room, the author “found, to his no small surprise and mortification, 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 images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!” (Pr. 7). The mention of dissolving images affirms the independent, picturelike quality of an initial vision. But the speaker’s subsequent “mortification” establishes a gloomier connection between the fading vision and loss of life: mortificare is to cause to die. The interruption of the processes of writing is a symbolic death, especially for the older Coleridge, who knows that he has lost his poetic genius.

As if to revise the preceding simile and derive new assurance, the preface cites ten lines from Coleridge’s poem “The Picture.” This allusion is part of the effort to ground “Kubla Khan” visually. A “poor youth” suffers a loss like that of the narrator, and “then all the charm / Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair / Vanishes” (Pr. 8). But for the youth of “The Picture,” in a narcissistic fantasy, natural events restitute what has been lost:

The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon  
The visions will return! . . .  
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms  
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more  
The pool becomes a mirror.

[Pr. 9–10]

Coleridge’s conversation poems and reading of Hamlet similarly revolve around this quest after a mirror of the self. For the preface narrator, however, the metaphor fails: although he retains “some vague and dim recollection” of the vision, his fragments do not unite. In the narrative that describes the author’s dream and transcription, the disruption is nonreversible and does not end in restoration. Falling short of the author’s “phantom-world,” the preface only mirrors another text.

The final paragraph of the preface contrasts the author’s deliberate
intentions and his spontaneous creation: "from the 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" (Pr. 11). The author's sleep writing takes on the aura of an inspired moment, "given" by unexplainable forces and inaccessible to conscious intentions. The preface thus claims that "Kubla Khan" is an inspired fragment never resumed after its abrupt interruption. The closing sentence projects a hypothetical future and readership by citing Theocritus' words, "I'll sing to you a sweeter song another day" (later emended to "I'll sing to you a sweeter song tomorrow"). Like the final lines of the poem, this final proleptic awareness combines positive anticipation with a negative moment: "but the to-morrow is yet to come."

The last stanza of "Kubla Khan" does not appear to derive from the same effortless, unreflective impulse that allegedly produces "the lines that are here preserved." Thus critics have been as skeptical of the poem's formal unity as doubtful of its genetic unity. Several interpreters consider the poem to be divided into two disparate parts, before and after the shift to first person in the third stanza. According to the critical cliché, an impersonal voice describes Kubla's pleasure dome and grounds, after which a first-person speaker recalls a past vision, loosely associated with Xanadu. Based on the shift in "vision" that occurs in the last stanza, this received idea ignores the complications of the middle stanza, yet a two-part structure of the poem is commonly admitted.

In the closing lines of the poem, a first-person voice presents an alternative version of origins. Like the preface, these lines interpret the mysteries of vision: "A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw" (KK 37–38). Discontinuous with previous descriptions by the first stanza, these words implicate the speaker in his visionary experience and locate the vision at a distinct, past time. The dream is over. No longer speaking as if the forests were "here" and the gardens "there," the nostalgic voice recollects something that is no longer

immediately present, even to imagination. The first appearance of Kubla’s world emphasizes the visual, but the damsel vision attends to sound:

It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.

[KK 39-41]

A new set of proper names displaces Xanadu, Kubla, and Alph. The modified proper names, like the damsel’s song, introduce additional words into the vision. As his earlier imaginative scene is superseded, the speaker loses his referential assurance, breaks off his representational pretense, and tries to recall the song of his imaginary figure: the Abyssinian Maid sings of a place, in a referential mode. Rather than strive to regain his attempted correspondence to immediate vision, the speaker gives up his own song in order to seek hers:

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight ’twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

[KK 42-47]

An imagined recollection of the damsel’s music replaces the visions of Xanadu. But the relationship between damsel and dome is mysterious: what does the new vision have in common with the old? If the visions are linked, why is the damsel absent from Kubla’s domain? The speaker’s imagined damsel, playing her “sweet” instrument, contrasts the “woman wailing” he projects into Kubla’s turbulent pleasure grounds. The speaker implicitly acknowledges the instability of poetic constructs when he anticipates building “that dome in air.”

As he longs to regain his lost vision, the speaker echoes intentions stated by the preface: “from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what

13 Could this “Alph” be the first letter of the Hebrew (or Greek) alphabet, making the sacred river a sacred language that flows “through caverns measureless to man”?
had been originally, as it were, given to him.” As in the citation from Theocritus (Pr. 12), completion depends on the existence of an imagined audience: “And all who heard should see them there.” The audience retraces the sequence of the author’s creative process: his vision gives him a voice, and their hearing produces a visionary sight. Could the author speak his vision, the private would become public, establishing a previously isolated vision as a common referent. At the same time, the speaker would be perceived as mad and banished to a circle for the purposes of exorcism.

This hypothetical communication would be incomprehensible, and provoke excommunication, because the audience could only respond with fear: “all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” (KK 48–49). The speaker is inscribed in the prosopopeia that presents others’ imaginary discourse, and hearers try to remedy the inspired state he now has them represent and invoke. The previous occurrence of things visionary makes relevant a warning to “weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes with holy dread.” Suddenly the auditor-speakers are like Kubla: they seek to enclose the threatening poet, as Kubla’s decrees try to secure his pleasure grounds. A reversal takes place: whereas the speaker earlier identifies with Kubla and the poetic effort to stabilize a dome of pleasure, now he and his vision specifically endanger customary boundaries. Once the speaker renounces efforts to build on ground, instead seeking to “build that dome in air,” he is associated with the destabilizing forces that undo Kubla’s pleasure. Deviation from the conversational mode unleashes dangerous forces. The radicalized mode of monologue, a self-referential innovation that pretends to present the language of a dream, threatens to overturn the entire monological reference.

Similar to the second half of the preface, the final stanza of “Kubla Khan” recognizes that the vision has faded. The preface explicitly narrates the scene of interruption and accepts the poem as a fragment. The poem, however, only implies and does not directly acknowledge the disappearance of vision. Without thematizing this loss, the speaker attempts to recuperate what has gone or rather considers the possible consequences of such a recuperation. The imagined speech of auditors at first affirms the preceding visionary stanzas, yet their response also works against affirmation. Because “I cannot” is implied by the con-
ditional statement that begins, "Could I," the first two stanzas are undermined.14 If the poet cannot "build that dome in air," then the speaker himself judges his rendering of Xanadu unsuccessful. At the moment the voice reads and speaks its own failure to represent, the fictional pretense is undone and the poem ends. Though the poem ultimately strives for assurance, its final prosopopoeia narrates as complete a deterioration as the preface, only figuratively. While the preface unifies the poem by linking it to a single scene of writing, the final stanza of the poem shifts scenes as it projects voices and intensifies the speaker's retrospective confession of dissolution. The preface recalls a visionary writing that is abruptly disrupted; the poem (p)refigures this external interruption as an internalized self-undoing.

Coleridge's conversational poems and "Kubla Khan" exemplify one stage in the shifting traditions of literary monologue. Expressing a particular moment in time and treating "Kubla Khan" as a psychological curiosity, Coleridge presents a text that purports to transcribe mental processes. Romantic and post-Romantic monologues combine lyrical voice and dramatic scene to create a moment of feigned discourse, on the boundary between writing and representation.

Coleridge's conversation poems turn against their origins in Shakespearean soliloquy. Because the fictive speaker does not form part of a dramatic scenario, this persona is haunted by an absence that inheres in its pretense. "Kubla Khan" brings an end to the naive conversational mode, which it interrupts through the final acknowledgment: the dream is over. Whereas the conversation poems affirm the solitary voice, "Kubla Khan" shows its inadequacy, as it succumbs to a combination of external and internal pressures. The monologist, compelled to follow the peculiar constraints of written conversation, tends to lose touch with mimetic conventions. Pointing the way beyond Hamlet and toward poetic monologues by Shelley and Browning, "Kubla Khan" uncovers the affinity between monologue and

madness. As developed by nineteenth-century authors, the conventions of poetic monologue both create and disrupt the illusion of a speaking subject. Monologue as a rhetorical swerve joins with monologue as a fiction of solitude. Mad monologues gradually displace the eolian monologue of meditation and move toward a new literary type that finds further expression in first-person narratives.

See, for example, Shelley's "Julian and Maddalo" and Browning's "Madhouse Cells."