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# “Earth Worm Wit Lies Under Ground”: The Compositional Genesis of Coleridge’s “Limbo” Constellation

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We can remark in passing that there is no better starting place  
for thought than laughter. (WALTER BENJAMIN)

In the beginning was the pun. (SAMUEL BECKETT)<sup>1</sup>

“Limbo” has long been understood as a representative instance of Coleridge’s late poetic style. Yet the various ways in which it has been understood have, unfortunately, often been positively unhelpful for illuminating either that poem or Coleridge’s late output in general. The judgment is often starkly evaluative: late verse such as “Limbo” is taken to be actively bad or at best a falling off from those incomparable early works with which we are all familiar from our own youths. “Dejection: An Ode” (1802), frequently employed as a watershed for such a chronology, would then be a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of creative sterility.

But the consequences are just as unfortunate, indeed perhaps even more so, when “Limbo” is taken to exemplify Coleridge’s late style in a positive manner. For then what is both good and representative in “Limbo” is overwhelmingly taken to be its existential darkness, its radically fragmentary and hermetic nature. Eric G. Wilson’s *Coleridge’s Melancholia* (2004) offers precisely such a reading: “If one feels that Coleridge’s 1811 poem ‘Limbo’ resonates with a similarly posthumous strain,” states Wilson, “it is not because Coleridge wrote the poem near the end of his life or because it is a smooth ripening of his primary ideas. Coleridge’s ‘Limbo’ was penned at the dark nadir of his existence, even before he wrote ‘Ne Plus Ultra’ and

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 2001), 101; Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove, 1957), 65.

'Human Life,' and the poem, far from a flowering of a life-long concern, reads like a last gasp of entropic collapse."<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I shall be outlining why I take this "dark nadir . . . of existence" to represent a misunderstanding of "Limbo." Yet any corrective needs to proceed from the recognition that the poem actively encourages such readings through the manner in which it has habitually been printed. From the "deathbed" 1834 edition of Coleridge's *Poetical Works*, which printed "Limbo" as a whole poem for the first time (while incorrectly listing its date of composition as 1817), to the current popular editions, readers have experienced "Limbo" as a self-sufficient poem, with its complex compositional history obscured. (The extracts known as "Moles" and "Ne Plus Ultra" form part of the same textual constellation and were published separately in the 1834 *Poetical Works*.) If "Limbo" appears so hermetic, it is because the poem has indeed been walled off.

The pioneering scholarship of Kathleen Coburn and Morton D. Paley has illuminated this complex compositional history.<sup>3</sup> When the constellation of writings from which "Limbo" emerges is returned to its compositional origin, an April–May 1811 notebook entry, we begin to sight a very different work.<sup>4</sup> This lugubrious, crepuscular work, it transpires, somehow begins its life as an engagement with the varieties of wit. In this essay I wish to build on Coburn and Paley's archival work by probing the conceptual significance of humor, both for this singular work and for Coleridge's output as a whole. Is "Limbo" then in some strange way actually trying to be funny? Not in any simple or undivided sense; but neither the thematic nor formal elements of the poem can be understood without attention to the apparently simple question of when, or whether, we laugh. Crucial to this question, but curiously ignored by criticism to date, is the question of verse form. For when "Limbo" truly becomes itself, becomes the poem we recognize as such, it moves from prose into a heroic couplet form that Coleridge almost never employed.<sup>5</sup> An attention to the manuscripts and formal meta-

2. Eric G. Wilson, *Coleridge's Melancholia: An Anatomy of Limbo* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 176.

3. Kathleen Coburn's monumental edition of Coleridge's notebooks first revealed comprehensively the manuscript context of "Limbo." See *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 vols., ed. Kathleen Coburn (vols. 4–5, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Merton Christensen) (Princeton University Press, 1957–2001), hereafter cited as *CN*. Like all Coleridge scholars, I owe her work an inestimable debt. Morton D. Paley offers the first dedicated reading of the successive elaborations of "Limbo" in *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 41–61. My work extends his analysis by considering how these successive moments are tied to a broader philosophical consideration of wit, and specific modulations of literary form.

4. The term *constellation* is Paley's.

5. For the only other real instance, see Coleridge's "Monody on the Death of Chatterton," though even here, the heroic couplet form is gradually broken up.

morphoses of "Limbo" therefore reveals a critical engagement with both the formal and conceptual resources of wit, as it comes to inform the tradition of satiric verse that spans from Donne to Pope. In so doing, it stakes a claim to what Walter Benjamin's epigraph sees as the cognitive yield of laughter.

## I

Coleridge's sustained interest in wit has often been taken as a retreat or repose from his more serious philosophical concerns. Yet we now possess much evidence that Coleridge reserved a conceptual significance for humor—and for one species of it in particular. In his marginal notes on Jakob Böhme's *Werke*, he writes, "All men who possess at once active fancy, imagination and a philosophical Spirit are prone to *Punning*."<sup>6</sup> This theme was constant: in a separate notebook entry, he speaks in rather grand terms of "my intended Essay in defence of Punning—(Apology for Paronomasy, *alias* Punning) to defend those turns of words . . . by proving that Language itself is formed upon associations of this kind" (*CN*, 3:3762). This pledge echoes through a series of related entries and letters to various correspondents,<sup>7</sup> leading Kathleen Coburn to wonder dryly whether "Coleridge's notebook entries, probably so much sparser than the thoughts behind and around them, sometimes made him feel that he had written an essay?" (*CN*, 3:3762n).

But Coleridge characteristically did not write it, leaving the pun's mooted linguistic significance undeveloped. Scholarship has attempted to compensate for this shortfall. Sylvan Barnet's "Coleridge on Puns" (1957) remains the only journal article devoted to the topic, yet finds itself concluding that "his explanation [of wordplay], though the best at its time, is no longer a safe foundation for modern study."<sup>8</sup> Critics including Paul Hamilton and William Keach have more recently attended to the pun in passing.<sup>9</sup> In Tim Fulford's *Coleridge's Figurative Language*, meanwhile, paronomasia

6. S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley and H. J. Jackson, 6 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1980), 1:610.

7. See, e.g., *CN*, 3:3762, 3542, 3789, 3954, 4267, 4309, 4444.

8. Sylvan Barnet, "Coleridge on Puns: A Note to His Shakespeare Criticism," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 56 (1957): 609.

9. See Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge's Poetics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 136n. William Keach notes that "Coleridge was philosophically interested in puns. . . . He appears to be on the point of devoting sustained attention to the phonetic, if not the graphic or economic, materiality of language in one of its conspicuously arbitrary dimensions. Again, though, his concern with words-as-things veers off in another direction" (*Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* [Princeton University Press, 2004], 31–32).

has a more general significance, providing a means of reconciling private and political registers, Coleridge's "personal language of love" and "the religious symbols of Jewish tradition."<sup>10</sup>

This essay treats two central issues in relation to Coleridge's interest in punning that have yet to be sufficiently addressed. The demonstration that Coleridge made systematic use of punning in a variety of different contexts does not explain precisely what (beyond its self-evident properties) made wordplay capable of operating now in a comic, now in a philosophical manner, or for what reasons it would need a defense. Coleridge's treatment of the Shakespearean pun is representative in this respect, caught as it is between a wordplay that would receive the sanction of divine precedent (biblical criticism had recently revealed the rather embarrassing fact of abundant paronomasia in the scriptures),<sup>11</sup> and a practice that, as Samuel Johnson saw it, was the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world.<sup>12</sup>

An account of the Coleridgean pun therefore has to consider its putative link to "a philosophical Spirit." One route into its philosophical significance comes through literary genre. In a series of related discussions, Coleridge strikingly anticipates Maureen Quilligan's claim for an intimate relationship between allegory and punning, which she develops at length in *The Language of Allegory* (1979). The allegorical personages that populate Spenser's *Faerie Queene* are not, Quilligan argues, simple incarnations of a stable essence ("Error"), but rather complex entities that accrue meaning through sustained etymological and associational play.<sup>13</sup> In his marginal notes on *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Coleridge is similarly interested in the capacity of an allegorical entity to come loose from the moorings that its title implies. To his mind, such volatility represents one of the supreme merits of Bunyan's work: "the writer's attempt to force the allegorical purpose on the Reader's mind . . . we go on with his characters as real persons, who had been nicknamed by their neighbours."<sup>14</sup> Yet the resultant linguistic instability, which for Quilligan so distinguishes the allegorical mode, comes to hold profoundly unsettling consequences for Coleridge, as when he claims

10. Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (London: Macmillan, 1991), xviii; for further treatments of punning, see 25–34, 117–19, and 156–58, among others.

11. For a demonstration of the difficulty biblical critics encountered in reconciling scriptural wordplay with the contemporary, urbane device of punning, see Johann Gottfried Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. James Marsh (Naperville, IL: Aleph, 1971), 210–12.

12. For particularly relevant treatments of Shakespeare in this regard see, e.g., *CN*, 4:4113, and Coleridge, *Marginalia*, 4:842.

13. Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 32–53.

14. S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures, 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. Reginald A. Foakes, 2 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1987), 2:103.

(again in relation to *The Pilgrim's Progress*) that "the allegory degenerates into a sort of *pun*."<sup>15</sup>

This tension translates into Coleridge's own employment of the allegorical mode, which in his later work only increases, despite the mode's famous apparent subservience to the holistic "symbol." Compositions such as "The Pains of Sleep" (1803), "The Visionary Hope" (1810), and "Time Real and Imaginary" (1811?) are all explicitly subtitled allegories and concern themselves with the epistemological gap between generic identity (the lowercase names we bear) and actual instantiation (the singular beings we are). Within the minor works, we find fragments such as "Allegorical Description" and "The Pang More Sharp than All: An Allegory" (both 1807), as well as "Love's Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegoric Romance" (1833), to name only those works that refer explicitly to their dominant mode. In all these works allegorical entities behave similarly to Bunyan's own "real characters," in that they default on the promise that their epithets extend: when in "The Pang More Sharp than All" we find "Kindness counterfeiting absent Love!" (line 58),<sup>16</sup> linguistic play destabilizes allegory at the moment that it appropriates the mode.

A further instance of literary form demonstrates Coleridge's investment in wit, in a manner that bears directly on "Limbo": satiric couplet verse. Donne's satires prove particularly significant in this respect, although they proved practically inseparable—for Coleridge, as for most educated scholars of the eighteenth century—from the influence of Pope, who had famously revised "Satyre II" and "Satyre IV" so as to regularize their formal oddities. Coleridge argues against Pope's revisions, asking us to read the "Satires as [Donne] meant them to be read and as the sense & passion demand, and you will find <in> the lines a manly harmony."<sup>17</sup> Yet the very term in which the argument is made ("manly harmony") suggests that Pope (and the smoothness that he was seen to indicate) could not be so easily discarded.

In this relation, we find an eminently Coleridgean expostulation: "The wit of Donne, the wit of Butler, the wit of Pope, the wit of Congreve, the wit of Sheridan—how disparate things are here expressed by one and the same word, Wit!—Wonder-exciting vigour, intensesness and peculiarity of thought, using at will the almost boundless stores of capacious memory, and exercised on subjects, where we have no right to expect it—this is the wit of Donne! The four others I am just in the mood to describe and inter-

15. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, 1:821.

16. S. T. Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, Bollingen Series 75, 3 vols., each in 2 pts. (Princeton University Press, 1962–2001), 1.2:828, hereafter cited as *PW*.

17. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, 1:377, and compare 2:216, 226.

distinguish;—what a pity that the marginal space will not let me!”<sup>18</sup> What a pity indeed. Yet I wish to argue that it was not for nothing that the “Defence of Paronomasy (*alias* Punning)” failed to be written. It was not just that the marginal space happened, bathetically, to run out. The several conceptual and historical problems intrinsic to wordplay meant that Coleridge would never address the issue in any systematic fashion. The April–May 1811 notebook entry would demonstrate that the only means for thinking through wit’s complexity would be verse itself.

## II

When we approach “Limbo” as it is habitually printed, it does indeed strike us as a sudden break, if not quite “a gasp of entropic collapse”:

Tis a strange place, this Limbo!—not a Place  
Yet name it so

(Lines 1–2)<sup>19</sup>

This is a fragment that seems to come from nowhere and that negates itself (“not a Place”) almost as soon as it appears. Yet if this poem is indeed a rupture of some sort, it is important to understand precisely what form of rupture, and from which surrounding context.

The April–May 1811 notebook entry in question begins as an extended discussion of precisely those varieties of wit we have seen Coleridge at such pains to distinguish. He is considering a number of his friends and contemporaries, whom he describes under a series of jesting pseudonyms:

*Crathmocraulo’s* Thoughts like Lice—They don’t *run* in his Head, as in other men’s; but he scratches it—that wakens them—& then they begun to *crawl*—and this increases his *Itching* (to be witty) & so he scratches it again.—At most, his Lice & his Sense, which I suppose is what he means by his “poetic License,” differs only as the note of a Cat & a Hawk—the one *meows*, & the other *pews*—the *Louse* crawls & the Thoughts drawl.—Hence when he murders some dull Jest which he has caught from some other man, he aptly calls it cracking a Joke—His <own are too sluggish, even to change their Quarters—> Tungstic Acid’s ~~Thoug~~ Wit is one of the Flea kind—skips & bites—& his Jokes Flea-skips and Flea-bites—but they leave a mark behind them, much of the same depth and duration—

Copioso deems his genius mercurial—and truly it *is* very like a Salvation—it flows from him without effort; but it is but Dribble after all. (CN, 3:4073–74)

18. *Ibid.*, 2:17.

19. *PW*, 2.1:882.

The accompanying notes of the Bollingen Series edition of *Poetical Works* state that "The sequence [of "Limbo," in its development from this passage] is consistent in its development away from its witty onset toward a penumbral zone of nightmare and horror, but compulsively so."<sup>20</sup> I do not wish to dispute such a summary in its general terms—but can we be so sure of any hard and fast distinction between wittiness and something more serious that we can speak of "development"?

Taken as a whole, the notebook entry challenges precisely such a distinction. "Tungstic Acid" is widely believed to designate Charles Lamb, although as the passage proceeds it begins to seem increasingly less important to identify any of the real figures. The subject is less any of these preposterous characters than wit itself, an animate force that moves freely between the individual and the general, the fluid and the reified. Wit is the force that "crawls," "itches," "skips" and "bites," but also that which successively substantializes or subjects itself, in the form of the "Lice," "a Cat & a Hawk," or even the capitalized "Joke." We do not need to work terrifically hard to note the puns at work here: poetic licence is a suggestive composite of "lice" and "sense," a dim and malicious echo of what Coleridge elsewhere called the "*sense* and the *passion*" of verse.<sup>21</sup> "Cracking a joke" is at once an act of wit and of murder. Despite this increasing autonomy of wit, as both serial figuration and associative practice, there is on the face of it no necessary reason why such concerns should lead to Donne. Perhaps the introduction of the "Flea" as one figure for wit sets this associative train running (after all, Coleridge considered "Donne's First Poem" to be "The Flea").<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the very compulsiveness that "itching" suggests recalls the experience of Donne's verse and thought. In Donne's "Satyre IV," for instance, we find a mind free from "pride's itch," and later, "Itch / Scratch'd into smart," whose repeated affricates, persisting across lines, are mimetic of the bodily urge that they describe.<sup>23</sup>

In any case, Coleridge's digressive block of prose now moves in an entirely surprising direction. That extract has developed both a sense of rhythm through the hyphens that Coleridge uses to punctuate (or not punctuate) his discussion, certain portions of which might even be scanned as verse. Other prosodic effects abound, most evidently rhyming pairs ("mews" and

20. *Ibid.*, 1.2:882.

21. Coleridge is referring to "Christabel," which depends "for it's [*sic*] beauty always, and often even for it's metrical existence, on the *sense* and the *passion*" (S. T. Coleridge to William Wordsworth, May 21, 1808, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1959–71], 3:112).

22. "First" here meaning the first poem printed in the version of Donne's *Poems* (1669) that Coleridge used.

23. John Donne, "Satyre IV," lines 5, 88–89, in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins (New York: Longman, 2008), 402.

“pews,” “crawls” and “drawls”) and layered repetition (“skips & bites—& his Jokes Flea-skips and Flea-bites”). The existence of such features does not, however, fully prepare us for when Coleridge curtails his discussion on the dashed phrase “after all—,” and continues the theme in verse. More specifically, Coleridge falls naturally, and from the start, into the heroic couplets of Donne’s satires, despite employing the form almost never:

it is but dribble after all—  
~~Cramp’d Crathmo~~ crawls, ~~quick~~ rash Tungstic’s quips & quibbles  
 And ~~Copioso~~ loves a lucky Hit  
 Yea, his mouth waters, hungry is his Wit  
 (As when the Tempest *scours* the Heaven bright.)  
~~See Crathmo~~ ~~craulto~~, ~~hear~~ ~~Tungstic~~ ~~quip~~ ~~and~~ ~~quibble~~  
 And Huge Tungtubig has such a *hungry* Wit  
 That his Mouth waters at a lucky Hit.  
 But the Streams passsing o’er like a poison’d ground,  
~~And~~ The poor <dead> Jests, like Gudgeons drugg’d and drown’d,  
 Float, wrong side up, in a Flow of Dribble:  
 <While Crawl, *whose earth-worm Wit* lives under ground,  
 Slow wriggles up to Light in some laborious Quibble—>

(CN, 3:4073)

This formal irruption is far from incidental: this particular verse unit provides the means through which Coleridge thinks further his thematic concerns. From this earliest stage we detect the ghost of another tradition playing off the more acknowledged influence of Donne; Coleridge’s “lucky Hit” echoes Pope’s “Never was dash’d out, at one lucky hit, / A fool, so just a copy of a wit.”<sup>24</sup> The formal requirements of the heroic couplet allow him to realize a phonic potential (assonances such as “Cramp’d Crathmo crawls,” “quips and quibbles,” “drugg’d and drown’d”), which powered the skipping, staccato quality of Coleridge’s prose but previously lay half-concealed within it. This impromptu poem is still, perhaps, little more than a self-consciously witty bit of slapdash, but the dictates of the rhyme scheme into which Coleridge so naturally falls force the development of a sequence of imagery that more closely anticipates the later development of the poem. Wit has already become more than a simple means for Coleridge to discriminate among his more or less irritating personal acquaintances, to become something capable of suggesting “poison’d” streams, and the subterranean “earth-worm Wit,” evoking topologies that are to be crucial to “Limbo” proper.

At this stage, Coleridge once more breaks off the entry, leaving a verse fragment under which we find the somewhat unexpected title, “On Donne’s

24. Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*, 2.47–48, in *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford University Press, 2006), 461.

first Poem." What follows is a concentration both of wit's artifice (in a series of comically overblown puns) and of its more sinister implications:

On Donne's first Poem.

Be proud as Spanishards! and ~~Skip~~ Leap for Pride, ye Fleas  
 Henceforth in Nature's *Minim* World Grandees,  
 In Phoebus' Archives registered ~~I see~~ are ye—  
 Your Letters And this your Patent of Nobility.  
 No Skip-Jacks now, nor civiller Skip-Johns,  
~~But Saintly~~  
 I hail you one and all  
 Dread Anthropophagi! Specks of living Bronze,  
 I hail you one & all, sans Pros ~~an~~ or Cons  
 Descendents from a noble Race of *Dons*.

What tho' that great ancestral Flea be gone  
 Immortal with immortalizing Donne—  
 His earthly Spots ~~clean'd,~~ <burnt out> bleach'd off as  
~~Ghostmen~~ Papists gloze,  
 In purgatory fire on Bardolph's Nose,  
 Or else starved out, his aery tread defied  
 By the dry Potticary's ~~parchment~~ bladderly Hide,  
 Which cross'd unchang'd and still keeps in ghost-Light  
 Of lank Half-nothings his, the thinnest Sprite.

(CN, 3:4073)

Coleridge is evidently having fun at least some of the time here: Donne, the exemplar of the satirical mode, receives not one but two puns on his name (a practice he himself was first to indulge in). The ironically learned fleas are descendants of "*Dons*," a privilege that rescues them from the fate of being "Skip-Jacks" or "Skip-Johns." The former, as the *OED* rather wonderfully glosses for us, is a now sadly archaic description of "a pert shallow-brained fellow; a puppy, a whipper-snapper; a conceited fop or dandy."<sup>25</sup> The transition from "Skip-Jack" to "civiller Skip-John" naturally allows for a witticism at the expense of the womanizing "crazy Jack," an early incarnation that the more pious Donne would come to regret.

But I am not so much interested in noting the proliferation of puns within this passage than I am in what they enable within Coleridge's prosody. "Skip," to take the example at hand, is a lexical unit that migrates within this evolving text as a term with shifting significations in its own right but also a particle brought into context with other elements, a charged prefix or suffix. The term, we recall, entered first into the prose element as a descriptor of

25. *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com>, s.v. "skipjack," n., def. 1.

the flea's movement, to form the portmanteau "Flea-skips," before migrating into this second verse section, in the very first line, where it is struck out in favor of "Leap," only to return—this time as prefix not suffix—in the punning "Skip-Jacks and Skip-Johns." We might say that the language here "skips" more generally, in the dual sense (prone itself to a simple pun) of moving rapidly and possibly haphazardly between places and of missing the intervals that would make a simple reconstruction of the sense possible.

A skipping, or leaping, language shows itself clearly in the other terms that Coleridge effaces, only to allow them to rematerialize later within the text. The word "Ghostmen" is replaced by "Papists," in an attempt to make the piece a more recognizable religious satire; yet (a part of) the term returns four lines later in the "ghost-Light" through which the fleas travel. Coleridge clearly perceives the Catholic imagery that begins to proliferate (and that after all will compel the titling of what follows, the "true" "Limbo") as an opportunity for merrymaking. Yet this play develops more worrisome implications almost from its onset. (We might recall that Donne was not only poetically exemplary but also religiously suspect for Coleridge, given what he took to be his Catholic strain.) The "Papists gloze" ("gloze" being an archaic term for "gloss") is an attempt to mock the archaic and willfully disingenuous learning that Coleridge associated with Rome. But it also phonologically suggests "glows," which in turn contributes to a sense of common imagery ("fire," the once-again effaced "~~burnt-out~~"), which steers Coleridge toward—if not a hypostasized Purgatory whose real existence he never credited—a sort of lowercase, lexical purgatory that would be parasitical (or flea-like) on the discredited religious term. To make the matter more concrete: the fire of purification is bathetically transfigured from a real theological postulate into events taking place on a nose (casting, in the process, an oblique reference to a scene between Falstaff and Bardolph in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*).

Coleridge, with his numerous ongoing physical ailments, knew better than most the potentially witty (or not so witty) associations that could be made between uppercase and lowercase purgatories, purgatives, purges, and other terms so etymologically bound as to be readily confused. Indeed, there is a certain anxiety or disgust regarding corporeality that allows the scholarly "~~parchment~~" to be both substituted and interchanged for Potticary's "bladdery hide." But finally it is not the corporeal excrescence, be it Bardolph's nose or Potticary's bladder, which so starts to worry Coleridge's poem at this point. It is rather that the very thematic discussion and application of punning with which the extract begins, and that powers the juvenile if enjoyable antipapal satire that resulted, in turn begins to lead to a more widespread linguistic volatility, where the mercurial capacity for words to come loose from their moorings, which has previously produced much of the satire, now becomes something untoward. This much is clear in the rad-

ically different, hollowed-out feel of the final two lines cited above, with their "Ghost-light" and "lank Half-nothings," which lead directly into the atmosphere of "Limbo" as we know it, or believed we knew it:

Of lank half-nothings his, the thinnest Sprite  
 The sole true ~~Any~~ *Something* this in Limbo Den  
 It frightens Ghosts, as Ghosts here frighten men—  
 Thence cross'd unraz'd and shall, at some ~~due~~ fated Hour,  
 Be pulverized by Demogorgon's Power  
 And given as poison, to annihilate Souls—  
~~Even now it shrinks them! inwards! and~~ they shrink in, as Moles  
 (Nature's mute Monks, live Mandrakes of the ground)  
 Creep back from Light, then listen for its Sound—  
 See but to dread, and dread they know not why  
 The natural Alien of their negative Eye.

(*CN*, 3:4073)

This passage, which is sometimes published as a separate poem under the title "Moles,"<sup>26</sup> further develops this radically distinct tone. But can we be so quick to cut what is now recognizably becoming "Limbo" adrift from everything that has gone heretofore? On a formal level, we find precisely the same heroic couplets that engendered (and were engendered by) the more recognizable earlier satire, which persist even through this radical shift in register and indeed to the very end of the constellation.

What does it mean when a form such as the heroic couplet, with its own peculiar conventions, structures a poem whose concerns are tending so far from a merely urbane wit? For a start, we should perhaps reconsider our assumption that the heroic couplet is merely "urbane" or ornamental in the first instance, a romantic bias that persists in our present time. We view once more in Donne's "Satyre IV" a thematic continuity, in this case with issue of purgatory:

Well; I may now receive, and die; my sin  
 Indeed is great, but I have been in  
 A purgatory, such as feared hell is  
 A recreation, and scant map of this.<sup>27</sup>

The heroic couplet develops a sense of self-answering not only through rhyme-pairs, but also consistent stress patterns and linear parallelisms (we see both of the latter in "purgatory" and "recreation" above).

26. See, e.g., *PW*, 1:880. In my view, the very fact that the term *Limbo* first arises in this passage suggests that all such division occludes our sense of the constellation as a whole.

27. Donne, "Satyre IV," lines 1–4.

Coleridge inherits this concentration of meaning, and collision of register, as the pressure for completion enforces association. The couplet's apparent artifice (a sense of which Coleridge and Wordsworth did much to encourage), the contention of its formal properties and thematic content (at this stage, a series of diffuse entities resisting any attempt to impose order on them), here generates its yield. This is not the explosion of form but the rediscovery of what was critical within it. So "Souls" oddly answers "Moles," a straight rhyme that—as the Bollingen *Poetical Works* notes—recalls Alexander Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady": "Most souls, 'tis true, but peep out once an age, / Dull sullen pris'ners in the body's cage."<sup>28</sup> Wit, one variety of which Coleridge recently termed "earth worm," continues to migrate under the surface, to substantialize itself in a series of subterranean (and blind) figures. Yet the lingering echo of Pope suggests that this heroic couplet remains uncertain where its true inheritance or fealty lies. Indeed, in several respects Coleridge's sole major undertaking in the form resembles Pope's far more nearly than it does the acknowledged influence of Donne: we find none of the run-ons that are so marked in the above extract from "Satyre IV," for example. Yet the closed couplets of "Limbo" do not thereby accrue a Popean polish. Far from it: as if by adhering too closely to the containment of line and syntax, the ensuing clause consistently feels like a logical lurch, continuing those rough breaks that the original prose had marked with a dash. We find a variety of imagery and association comparable to Donne, but without the supple tissue that would connect it.

A conspicuous wordplay is all that holds these fleeting associations in place: the digression "(Nature's mute Monks, live Mandrakes of the ground)" offers a nearly unsurpassable mimicry of Donne's metaphysical wit. Yet it is also more than this. In one of the rare essays directly to address the poem's relation to Donne, John A. Hodgson argues convincingly that Coleridge at this point evokes a passage from Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemia*, which Coleridge had read and annotated: "Many . . . false conceptions there are of *Mandrakes*, the first from great Antiquity, conceiveth the Root thereof resembleth the shape of Man; which is a conceit not to be made out by ordinary inspection."<sup>29</sup> The figure of the "Mandrake" is therefore at once that which is poisonous to man, and which lies, via radical etymology, at the root of man. Yet we do not need to be able to trace the "Mandrake" to Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemia*, to "get" the pun, in order to

28. Alexander Pope, "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady," lines 17–18, in Pope, *Major Works*, 148.

29. Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemia*, 2.6.1, quoted in John A. Hodgson, "Coleridge, Puns and 'Donne's First Poem': The Limbo of Rhetoric and the Conceptions of Wit," *John Donne Journal: Studies in the Age of Donne* 4 (1985): 194–95.

experience the more general sense of a phonemic (therefore semantic) field shot through with significance. Just as the portmanteau "Skip-Jack" contained a particular ("Jack") within the general term, so we sensuously intuit the "Man" contained (or constrained) within "Mandrake."

The composition of the heroic couplet line further leads Coleridge to play on language in the form of neologism. The curious if easily overlooked coinage *annilate* (which the *OED* registers no use of) is prescribed partly by syllabic conformity; the more customary *annihilate* would further increase the count. Yet the neologism winnows the sense at the very point that its elision helps to meet the formal requirements, as if nothing competed with itself, through the displaced Latinate *nihil*, to the economic monosyllable "nil." This continual playing on the nothing that can never remain itself (never remain a pure absence) will continue into "Limbo" itself. And indeed it is at this point that we finally cross the threshold into what we had taken for the opening of that poem:

~~Tis a strange Place, this Limbo! for not a Place  
We will never call it.~~

The accumulated density of negation ("not . . . never") leads Coleridge to efface the whole opening, where the manuscript had previously remained relatively untouched. Having struck through a further four lines, he begins over in a now more familiar way:

Tis a strange Place this Limbo! not a Place,  
Yet name it ~~that~~ so—where Time & ~~hungry~~ weary Space  
Fetter'd from flight, with night-mair sense of Fleeing  
Strive for their last crepuscular Half-being—  
Lank Space, and <scytheless> Time with ~~scytheless~~ branny Hands  
Barren and soundless and as the measuring Sands,  
Mark'd but by Flit of Shades—unmeaning they  
As Moonlight on the Dial of the Day—

(Lines 1–8)<sup>30</sup>

Here we find a number of motifs both echoed and displaced. Hodgson complains that this "Limbo" bears little relation to the established Catholic notion.<sup>31</sup> But far from being concerned with such theological distinctions, Coleridge wishes precisely to blur them: hence, in 1827, a similar version of

30. *PW*, 2.2:1095.

31. "But Coleridge's mistaken mention of purgatory when he cites the witticism on his Shakespeare lecture prompts the misgiving that Donne's flea burns in fire not of revision but of misprision. And the doubt is compounded by Coleridge's curious, even perverse blurring, inexplicable in one of his theological learning save as sheer wilfulness or disregard, of Purgatory and Limbo" (Hodgson, "Coleridge, Puns," 192).

the poem bears the droll title “Limbo, alias Purgatory.”<sup>32</sup> There is still a trace of the relish of wit here. But this satirical subversion of boundaries itself begins to establish a different kind of Limbo, no less foreboding for being profane.

It is here, indeed, that we find Coleridge employing what we traced earlier, an allegorical mode that seems to defy allegory itself. For Limbo is not the only capitalized entity to be deprived of its proper substance or attributes. Time and Space suffer similar privations, a fact rather troubling for those Kantians (such as Coleridge) who regard them as the “two pure forms of sensible intuition as principles of *a priori* cognition.”<sup>33</sup> “Place” is enshrined with a majuscule, only to be once more swiftly negated (“not a Place”), as if Coleridge were now in danger of writing a poem that was continual dispersion and restitution, whereupon the pragmatic interjection (“yet name it so”) pays the price of further undercutting allegory in order to buy the continuation of the poem.

Time and Space, when they do enter the stage, behave so contrary to our presumptions that we wonder whether their presence might be a matter of lexical happenstance. The allegorical functions more as a means of concentrating prosodic effect than as a guarantor of meaning. These eight lines, as elaborate and compacted as anything Coleridge wrote, resound with a series of phonological coincidences that raise doubts as to whether they are anything more than purely phonological. The early substitution of “weary” for the equally improbable “~~hungry~~” (what would it mean, really, to conceive of a personified “Space” that was fatigued or ravenous?) suggests that sonority (the common sounds of these two words or the requirements of the line) is beginning to consume thematic concerns.

Indeed, when Coleridge returns to the task of fleshing out Space and Time, their attributes become only more counterintuitive. That “Space” is somehow “Lank” seems on the face of it nonsensical, until we recall that the adjective—like “skip,” like “ghost”—has already occurred in an earlier portion (“Of lank half nothings his . . .”) and is therefore one of those terms compulsively to recur with little regard for its particular context. Why, then, is Space “Lank”? One answer, perhaps the only answer capable of passing muster, is the common phonological aspects of the words. The vowel sound (“Lank Space”) establishes a common cause of sorts, while also—and perhaps more important—forcing two heavy stresses at the start of the line, a spondee that Coleridge associates with the roughness, or passion, of Donne’s meter.

32. I am more interested in the immediate genesis of “Limbo” from the 1811 notebook entry, so I do not consider the slight revisions Coleridge makes to his poem sixteen years later.

33. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 174.

A consideration of the subsequent relation between personifications and their attributes confirms this view. Coleridge relocates the curiously privative adjective "scytheless" from the capitalized "Hands" to its counterpart "Time." Much like "Lank Space," we now have a concordance of drawn-out vowel sounds, which enact the distended temporality ("*scytheless Time*") that the line names. With the various sonorous associations, we barely have the time to attempt to picture an allegorical Time defined as not wielding a scythe could possibly look like or to consider why such a privation might be counterintuitive (after all, scythes typically belong to other personifications). The other effect of relocating "scytheless" to the proper name "Time," is to concentrate the semantic (but, equally important, sonorous) tie between "branny" and "Hands." In the space of one line, we therefore have three strong coincidences of vowel sounds:

Lank Space, and <scytheless> Time with ~~scytheless~~ branny Hands.

The subsequent line only deepens the sense that assonance or sonority—rather than any transparently mimetic or allegorical design—is guiding the whole. The figure of "branny Hands," which, once again, requires quite a mental stretch to conceive, is further destabilized by the modifiers that are superimposed. "Barren" appears close enough to the previous epithet to be almost an anagram of it. If it is hard to picture any of these prospective, hypostasized subjects ("Space," "Time," or "Hands": the syntax leaves the modified noun open) as "barren," it is harder still to conceive them as "soundless." Indeed, this epithet (beyond its continuation of an identifiable trope of negation, or "lessness") is significant in virtue of its position in a pattern of linear spacing:

Lank space and <scytheless>  
Barren and soundless.

The fugitive quality of these epithets induces a series of sudden and apparently unprovoked transitions. We previously noted how the prose passage from which "Limbo" gradually took form was characterized by a certain protoprosody of its own, through its skipping rhythm, assonance, rhyme, and so forth. Conversely, this passage of "Limbo" has not entirely thrown off the salient nonprosodic features of that prose. Most obvious, the proliferation of long dashes, which had allowed Coleridge to make rapid associations of wit, persist even into the heroic couplet line (being present in three of the eight lines quoted above), disrupting any smooth metrical progression but enabling a sequence of radical transports of imagery. The ghost of a wit lives on through associations that, no longer obviously funny, assume a fleeting quality. A hollowed out Time suggests the "measuring Sands," where the only obvious point of congruence between the figures (Time might suggest the sand of the hourglass) is overruled by a nonsensi-

cal and negative comparison: “soundless as the measuring Sands.” Negation here is a generalized process applied to substances (“unmeaning,” “soundless”), but it is also that which itself becomes substantialized, in the capitalized form of the “Flit,” the “Fleeing,” the “Shades.”

We might well trace the afterlife of the pun in this series of associations that play on the arbitrary or phonological aspects of language. But perhaps the clearest indication of its survival lies in a line whose significance is submerged in the customary printing of “Limbo” as a self-sufficient poem. For Coleridge’s ambiguous formulation “Fetter’d from flight” (which we might read alternately as privation both through and from escape) should be deeply familiar to us: “Fetter’d from flight, with night-mair sense of Fleeing.” On first glance, we might suspect the line of implicit tautology (surely “flight” is but the substantive of “Fleeing”?). But the taught energy of this line (where “night-mair,” as one of several dismantled portmanteaus, forces us to stress both its syllables heavily, producing a line of six stresses, an appropriate lead-footedness) offers more than blank self-confirmation. The full notebook entry reveals this curious capitalized “Fleeing” to possess a singular significance. The flea, which has already been “pulverized” and reconstituted throughout Coleridge’s prose and verse, is here transported into another linguistic region entirely, as if it were possible somehow “to flea” as a verb, as a painfully transitive process, in this final, obstinately unfunny pun. But that is precisely what has become possible: the witty impulse, which commenced as a play on the internal resources of language, has engendered a self-parasitical linguistic realm, which recasts itself (as the substantive, the epithet, the verb) without ever managing to escape itself. We do not need to laugh at this line to understand it, but we do need to understand how a wordplay that began in humor has mapped the contours of the poem as a whole and generated a momentum that has taken it far from laughter.

The pun, then, in the image of the flea, lives on, in however transfigured a form. But Coleridge does not end his poem at this nightmarishly lurid moment. (To do so would be to have made his poem merely the most highly wrought and associatively dense of his late, curious allegories.) The unfunny wordplay reaches a kind of degree zero with the subsequent “unmeaning they / As Moonlight on the Dial of the Day.” This prevailing “unmeaning,” aside from being stated, is deepened by an etymological mirroring: where “Dial” derives from the Latin *dies*, or “Day.” Language’s apparent variance would seem to reference only itself.

Yet an unexpected break occurs precisely at this apex of linguistic self-reference. Once again, a barrage of dashes announces it:

As Moonlight on the Dial of the Day—  
But that is lovely—looks like Human Time,  
An old Man with a steady Look sublime

That stops his earthly task to watch the Skies—  
 But he is blind—a statue has such Eyes—  
 Yet having moon-ward turn'd his face by chance—  
 Gazes the orb with moon-like Countenance  
 With scant grey white hairs, with fore-top bald & high  
 He gazes still, his eyeless Face all Eye—  
 As twere an Organ full of silent Sight  
 His whole Face seemeth to rejoice in Light  
 Lip touching Lip, ~~with~~ all moveless, Bust and Limb,  
 He seems to gaze at that which seems to gaze on Him!

(Lines 8–20)<sup>34</sup>

This passage somehow manages to pack seven dashes into its first nine lines, leaving suspended not only those line endings that the couplet should tie together (“Skies—,” “Eyes—,” “chance—,” and again “Eye—”) but also, on more than one occasion, the line itself. It is not until the succeeding four lines, where an atmosphere of incongruous tranquility descends, that the dashes drop out and the verse can get back to being something like an uninterrupted heroic couplet.

But the skipping, “rough” rhythm of these earlier nine lines has already brought a dramatic tonal shift to the poem. It is no surprise that those readings of “Limbo” that stress its apocalyptic feel choose to gloss over this passage, as a brief mirage of hope before the constraining vision returns.<sup>35</sup> But just as the wit of Coleridge’s notebook entry fed naturally into the darkening verse fragment, so too this recovery of the human emerges from a consistent manipulation of language. A thin simile (“looks like”) is all that brings the pseudoallegorical figure of “Human Time” into being. Yet this mere semblance, which earlier undermined personifications such as Time and Space, here recovers particularity. The impossibility of telling the time, much less the Time (we recall the “unmeaning . . . Dial of the Day”) nonetheless is felt as, precisely, “Human Time.” Where another of Coleridge’s late allegories, “Time Real and Imaginary,” suggests an objective temporality somewhere to be found, here the accidental intrusion of the human is the only real. When the divinely mandated linguistic coincidence of the pun had become a profane nightmare, only now does Coleridge prove able to recover the other strand of his theorization, which views paronomasia as passionate excess and allegorical ruin as an opportunity to “go on with [the] characters as real persons.”

While the suddenness of this rupture (indicated by the strikingly unguarded “But that is lovely—”) cannot be overstated, it also transfigures

34. *PW*, 2:2:1095.

35. For a concise summary of these accounts, see Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry*, 51–52.

the associative practice that has defined the verse to this point. The mere semblance of “looks like,” through which so many of the poem’s unlike phases were yoked together, becomes the active substantive “Look.” A catachresis of simile (“looks like” in both senses, offered up to the cheap pun) remains present but is now felt experience: as in the oddly transitive “Gazes the orb with moon-like Countenance,” where the ambiguous “with” suggests both perceiver and percipient. Taken out of its structural and prosodic context, such a line might well be used to indict a chiasmic interaction of mind and world so characteristic to naïve romanticism; but this would be to ignore the remarkable formal manipulation that had preceded it.

Nowhere does Coleridge spare us the threat that this hard-won particular might itself become reified as concept or monument (“a statue has such eyes”). But the poem reinhabits the negation that had composed it: Coleridge again writes “moveless” rather than “still” to describe this human entity, just as earlier “soundless” was preferred to “silent.” Yet “moveless” is no longer privative but rather a felt contiguity between self and world (“Lip touching Lip”). Eyelessness, unlike all the privations that preceded it, actuates experience through what it is not, where the majesque is no longer the general, or conceptual but rather a willed manifestation: “his eyeless Face all Eye—.”

Prosody does not stand apart from such shifts. The forced archaisms of “twere” and “seemeth” not only permit a tone of reverie but also open up a rare passage of three continuous, decasyllabic lines. This continuity finally discharges itself as the poem’s sole moment of passionate excess, a flurry of twelve monosyllables: “He seems to gaze at that which seems to gaze on Him!” Mere semblance here only deepens self-inherence. And this “seems” does not only (like “gaze”) answer itself; the burst of twelve monosyllables forces us to emphasize both its occurrences. The sense could easily be preserved (and the line returned to a more habitual decasyllable) by cutting one “seems to.” But this would only obscure the poem’s conversion of semblance, from an unmeaning process of association, to the one means toward a felt affinity with the world. Even so late in the poem, the ghost of wordplay lingers. Can we read this final, self-mirroring union of “Lip touching Lip . . . Bust and Limb,” without associating this particularized (yet capitalized) member with the poem’s title? A “Limb” might indeed finally be subsumed into Limbo. Yet this flickering, malicious wordplay also marks the human particularity that endures, even in the short, unwritten *o*, a ghostly presence that we nevertheless feel as far from zero.

The following, heavily revised passage might seem to undo this recovery as quickly as it occurred:

No such sweet Sights doth Limbo Den immure,  
Wall’d round and made a Spirit-gaejail secure

By the mere Horror of blank Nought at all—  
 Whose circumambience doth these Ghosts enthrall.  
 A lurid Thought is growthless dull ~~Nega~~Privation,  
 But the Hag, Madness, scalds the Fiends of Hell  
 With frenzy-dreams, all impassible  
 Of aye-unepithetable ~~Priv~~ Negation.<sup>36</sup>

Yet while the individualized "Human Time" does vanish from this closing passage, the retrieval of particularity from and through a self-mirroring language persists. Linguistic suggestiveness, which at first redirected this writing from its playful inception, now prevents us from denying the particularity that the verse has induced. It is certainly possible to gloss "No such sweet Sights doth Limbo Den immure" as "nothing pleasant goes on here." But the ambiguous, inverted syntax (Coleridge's archaisms do not drop out of the text) also posits a self-commentary in keeping with the one we have just witnessed: "Limbo never can fully encompass the singular." As if he could only now recollect an earlier verse tradition, Coleridge continues to significantly invert the syntax, with "Whose circumambience doth these Ghosts enthrall." The archaic "doth" underscores the similar difficulty of reading a verb of containment ("enthrall," where previously we had "immure") in any simple way (the *OED*, meanwhile, defines "enthrall" as "to captivate, hold spellbound, by pleasing qualities," as well as "to bring into bondage").<sup>37</sup>

The linguistic instability of the pun might seem a peculiar means of recovering human particularity, the sort of consolation that, as Adorno once said, we experience at funerals. But by way of contrast, Coleridge imagines a more radically negative state precisely beyond any linguistic deprivation: the "aye-unepithetable." A brief subsequent passage omitted from the published version sketches a journey across the underground river Styx, recalling the subterranean "Streams" from which wit first sprung. "The very names, methinks, might thither fright us—," Coleridge writes, before finding a worse fear than Styx, Limbo, or any other proper name. That prospect concludes the poem as habitually printed:

A lurid thought is growthless dull ~~Negation~~ Privation  
 Yet that is but a Purgatory Curse  
 Hell knows a fear far worse,  
 A fear, a future fate. Tis *positive* ~~Privation~~ Negation!

(Lines 25–28)<sup>38</sup>

36. *PW*, 1.2:1095.

37. *OED Online*, s.v. "enthrall/enthrall," *v.*, def. 1.

38. *PW*, 2.2:1096.

The attempt to discriminate between more or less absolute forms of negation is a recognizably romantic trope: in *Jerusalem*, Blake makes a point of distinguishing between “negation” and the “contraries.”<sup>39</sup> But I wish to conclude this reading by suggesting another source for Coleridge’s distinction. It is Spinoza’s Letter 21 to Blyenbergh:

I will proceed to explain further the words privation and negation, and briefly point out what is necessary for the elucidation of my former letter. I say then, first, that privation is not the act of depriving, but simply and merely a state of want, which is in itself nothing; it is a mere entity of the reason, a mode of thought framed in comparing one thing with another. We say, for example, that a blind man is deprived of sight, because we readily imagine him as seeing, or else because we compare him with others who can see, or compare his present condition with his past condition when he could see; when we regard the man in this way, comparing his nature either with the nature of others or with his own past nature, we affirm that sight belongs to his nature, and therefore assert that he has been deprived of it. But when we are considering the nature and decree of God, we cannot affirm privation of sight in the case of the aforesaid man any more than in the case of a stone; for at the actual time sight lies no more within the scope of the man than of the stone; since there belongs to man and forms part of his nature only that which is granted to him by the understanding and will of God. Hence it follows that God is no more the cause of a blind man not seeing, than he is of a stone not seeing. Not seeing is a pure negation.<sup>40</sup>

The identical distinction between “privation” and “negation,” as well as the acute attention to the figure of the “blind man,” makes it difficult not to see in Spinoza’s letter a source for Coleridge’s poetic constellation. Coleridge’s complex relation to Spinoza is in many ways summarized by this revision. (He was aware of Spinoza’s letters to Blyenbergh, having come across their Latin version in the *Opera omnia*.)<sup>41</sup> For Spinoza, it is a mistake to think of the blind man as being deprived, for “sight lies no more within the scope of the man than of the stone.” The consequences of such a view are immense, both for the affective regions of desire or regret and for the unimpeachable moral status of God.

39. “Negations are not Contraries: Contraries mutually Exist: / But Negations Exist Not” (William Blake, *Jerusalem*, pl. 17, lines 33–34, in *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes [Oxford University Press, 1972], 639).

40. Spinoza, *The Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 153–54.

41. See Coleridge, *Marginalia*, 5:202–3. Coleridge does not annotate Letter 21, although we elsewhere find detailed comments on Spinoza’s letters to Blyenbergh, which revolve precisely around the distinction between privation and negation. Incidentally, I suspect Coleridge identified rather with the much maligned Blyenbergh, a grain merchant and amateur philosopher, for reasons that we might speculate.

What difference does it make, when Coleridge substitutes negation for privation, and imagines the former, in defiance of Spinoza, as "a fear far worse"? For Coleridge the figure of the blind man does somehow enable us to actualize vision; his blindness figures what we have already experienced as the inherently privative nature of language, where there is no "pure negation," where the suffix "-less" implies the lingering presence of what it obviates. This is not news: that language functions in this negative manner was formulated by Saussure and intimated long before. Yet "Limbo" converts this privative language from a despairing unbelief in all proper or allegorical names, into an acceptance of the human share in that "want." In so doing, it recovers an irreducible particularity. This is easy to state blandly, perhaps, and does not make for a convincing phenomenology, much less a systematic philosophy. But this overly tidy paraphrase refers to a process that can only be understood as it develops through the various stages of Coleridge's unfolding work. This reading has revealed how Coleridge's "Limbo" constellation reinvests the tradition of verse wit with a critical force that it always possessed.

### III

Even granting everything that my reading of "Limbo" has proposed, the reader may still justifiably ask: So what? If we admit that Coleridge's relation to wordplay and wit in general was unexpectedly complex, and that it necessarily emerged through literary form, what broader consequences could that recognition possibly entail? In this concluding section I want to briefly sketch out an answer. Having suggested two related ways in which a rereading of "Limbo" can lead to a reappraisal of Coleridge's poetic output, I will go on to trace broader theoretical implications.

On the simplest possible level, "Limbo" explodes the notion that Coleridge's significant verse was restricted to the miraculous period 1795–1802. The constellation from which that poem emerges demonstrates that his middle-period poetry could not only keep company with that earlier output; it was also a sustained further consideration of concerns that would remain consistent throughout his active life. In this respect, the remarkable revisions that Coleridge would continue to make throughout his lifetime to the conversation poem sequence, and to the "Rime," further demonstrate the need to reconceptualize our chronology of his creative work. Verse never ceased to be a particular cognitive practice.

But this recognition in turn mandates a wider reappraisal of Coleridge's work and of the specific relationship between verse and the many other forms in which he thought critically. The past four decades have witnessed a remarkable burst in publication, triggered by Kathleen Coburn's five-volume edition of the notebooks (1957–2001) and continued across the

Princeton's Bollingen Series *Collected Works* (1962–2001). It is perhaps unsurprising that one net result has been to direct scholarly attention to the previously unpublished prose and philosophical writings. Paul Hamilton's *Coleridge's Poetics*, to take only one exemplary instance, represents perhaps the most comprehensive and ingenious synthesis of the huge volume of materials now available—and yet, despite its title, that work references not a single line of verse.<sup>42</sup>

My reading of “Limbo” thus forms part of a much larger study of Coleridge's verse practice. Its goal is not to challenge the invaluable work of Hamilton or others. On the contrary, it is my conviction that the recent editorial and critical work is partly significant insofar as it strongly presses us to reassess Coleridge's body of verse writing. Doing so, I hold, demonstrates the extent to which his verse further elaborated on those philosophical concerns that emerged across his wide output. But it does more than this. A sustained attention to Coleridge's poetry (and “Limbo” is representative in this respect in its treatment of the pun) reveals the extent to which certain of his concerns could only be thought in the context of verse. Why might this be so? There are a variety of reasons: that Coleridge never was the systematic philosopher he would have liked to be; that the conventions and formal resources of verse provided singular expressive (but also cognitive) possibilities and that certain issues proved conceptually serious but untreatable in propositional language.

Such a claim holds wider theoretical significance. In this respect, as in so many others, our understanding of Coleridge proves metonymical of our understanding of the field of English literature in general. The rerouting of critical attention from his verse output to the recently available prose writings indicates a more general aversion to the significance of poetic form. This represents a missed opportunity, for the sum of verse's conventions and resources offers a means for engaging with issues of the greatest theoretical complexity and relevance.

We might take the issue of the pun as offering a particularly concrete instance of this blind spot. Recent years have produced not one but two significant surveys of wordplay. In addition to Walter Redfern's popular history, *Puns: More Senses than One*, Jonathan Culler has edited the collection *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*.<sup>43</sup> While both these works demonstrate the wide-ranging theoretical significance of wordplay, they demonstrate a curious reluctance to submit punning to historical or textual particularity.

42. Other fine recent works that, again, focus primarily on the prose writings include James C. McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); and Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

43. Walter Redfern, *Puns: More Senses than One* (London: Penguin, 2000); Jonathan Culler, ed., *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

Even Derek Attridge's characteristically sensitive reading of Joyce's portmanteau moves, somewhat abruptly, to the general claim that "the *Wake* merely heightens a process that operates in all language, in spite of the Saussurean enterprise of separating with great strictness synchrony and diachrony."<sup>44</sup>

Yet surely the pun (Joyce's puns no less than any other) also raises the question of our particular affective response, of whether and how we laugh. In both our contextualization and close reading of "Limbo," we have seen how this affective response is also a matter of historical specificity. A particular historical community may react to wordplay with misgiving—as did those biblical critics who were perturbed to trace the frequency of punning in the Old Testament—while others merely chuckle (or groan). To make paronomasia a generalized trope for linguistic indeterminacy is to excise the conceptual significance of our laughter. "Limbo" grasps this truth through its critical reinvestment of satiric verse, and demands our affective response through the singular experience of language that the form provides. Its compositional genesis would finally prove the only "Defence of Punning" that Coleridge was able to complete.

44. Derek Attridge, "Unpacking the Portmanteau, or Who's Afraid of *Finnegans Wake*?" in Culler, *On Puns*, 152.