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Coleridge, Puns, and "Donne's First Poem": The Limbo of Rhetoric and the Conceptions of Wit

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Coleridge has long since won recognition from Donne scholars for his appreciation of the earlier poet; Grierson even included many of Coleridge's annotations in his magisterial 1912 edition, *The Poems of John Donne*. It was not until fairly recently, though, that Coleridge's most sustained poetic essay suggested by a poem of Donne's appeared more than fragmentarily in print. The verses stand in a lengthy notebook entry, mixed so inextricably with two other poems, "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra," that Coleridge's editors could never decide satisfactorily how to extract and present them. Their textual history is among the more vexed in Coleridge's poetic corpus.

Coleridge drafted "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra" in a notebook in 1811, but published them—or let them be published; we do not know how much control, if any, he exercised over this last-gasp salvaging of verse from his notebooks—only in 1834, in the death-bed *Poetical Works* edited by his nephew and son-in-law, Henry Nelson Coleridge. In 1893, J. D. Campbell presented a longer version of "Limbo," with ten new introductory lines. In 1912 Ernest Hartley Coleridge, while otherwise adopting the 1834 volume as authoritative, accepted Campbell's version of "Limbo" and appended to it a set of often curious and extravagant variants drawn both from the notebook and from an 1827 manuscript; he also noted that the original notebook drafts of "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra" were adjacent entries, and suggested that the poems were thematically related. These accretions only compounded the poems' palpable obscurities, while emphasizing their uncertain status. On rare occasions thereafter, the two poems were taken very seriously—particularly, it should be noted, by Coleridge's worthiest critics. Thus I. A. Richards singled out "Limbo" as among "Coleridge's deepest meditative poems," "powerful and terrifying," and "Ne Plus Ultra" as "Coleridge's most horrific and puzzling poem"; Walter Jackson Bate addressed them

as "two visionary poems of extraordinary power," "as powerful and condensed an expression of cosmic isolation as we can find in English poetry"; and Harold Bloom named them as the last two of Coleridge's "only nine poems that really matter."[1] But such attentions were unusual; more commonly, the poems were simply disregarded.

The critical comments I have just quoted date from 1950 to 1972. In 1973, with the publication of *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 3, Coleridge's original drafts of "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra" first appeared in print. There were the familiar lines—they prove to date not from 1817 and 1826, as E. H. Coleridge had guessed, but from 1811—but how changed in context! These apparently high-serious, deeply meditative, horrific poems, we now can see, have very humble origins. They originate from a spate of satirical puns, and very undistinguished puns at that, which prompt some verses in a similar vein and then, tangentially, a slight but witty poetical tribute (E. H. Coleridge printed the first twelve lines in an appendix as a "jeux d'esprit"), "On Donne's first Poem." And this initially joking, lighthearted poem on Donne's "The Flea" then quickly darkens, deepens, and finally blurs into the beginning of the poem we know as "Limbo"—a connection, it is surely safe to say, which no one unfamiliar with the notebook entry had ever guessed.

Thus this manuscript raises major, difficult, and quite unforeseen questions about the context and spirit of "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra"—and, let us not forget, about those of "On Donne's First Poem," too. It is the latter poem and its prelude which particularly concern me here.[2] What have such mere quibbles and witticisms to do with the poet's or the critic's true vocation; and what has Coleridge, of all poets and critics, to do with such buffoonery?

I. Poetic Lice-Sense

Coleridge's notebook entry begins with a protracted, laborious set of satirical puns characterizing certain jesters' sensibilities in terms of vermin:

> *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 begin 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", differ only as the note of a Cat & a Hawk—the one *mews*, & the other

> *pews*—the Lice crawl & 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 Wit is of the Flea kind—skips & bites—& his Jokes Flea-skips & Flea-bites—but they leave a mark behind them, much of the same depth & duration—[3]

The broad strokes and distinctions of Coleridge's satire here are clear enough, but many subtler shades of meaning, as might be expected in a journal, are personal and private. A precedent for Coleridge's little exercise occurs in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* when the elderly Johnson was asked "'whether do you reckon Derrick or Smart the best poet?' Johnson at once felt himself rouzed; and answered, 'Sir, there is no settling the point of precedency between a louse and a flea.'"[4] Here is the gist of Coleridge's own satirical analogy between two wits and these two particular vermin. Rather than leave the comparison at the level of simple denigration, however, Coleridge pursues it at length: if the precedency of louse or flea is uncertain, yet the distinctive characteristics are manifold, and if criticism does not care to discriminate between them, anatomizing satire will gladly do so.

Like Johnson's, Coleridge's jest may indeed be directed at specific individuals. "Tungstic Acid," at least, certainly alludes to Coleridge's close friend Charles Lamb, he of the "tongue-stick" stammer and the incorrigible delight in puns: Coleridge had applied the label to him as early as ten years before (see *N* I.977 and n). "Crathmocraulo" remains obscure, but Coleridge's further likening of cracking lice (killing them between one's fingernails) to Crathmocraulo's cracking (but at the same time murdering) jokes, and his implication, as I take it, that Crathmocraulo is something of a nit-picker point to some anonymous critic (possibly unknown even to Coleridge; the reviews were unsigned) for one of the periodicals.[5]

The name or phrase "Crathmocraulo," further, was current and significant in Coleridge's circle. That it comes, as Coburn points out, from Ossian (the name of a rocky terrain in *Cath-loda*) seems merely incidental; like "tungstic," the word appears to have been valued almost exclusively for its aural implications. Coleridge uses it again in a November 1813 letter to John Morgan's wife, Mary (Coleridge resided with John and Mary Morgan for much of 1810-16), again in the context of this same "lice-sense" pun: railing against "*all* Bluestockingism," he elaborates, "The least possible of it implies at least two *Nits*, in one egg a male, in t'other a female—& if not killed, O the sense of the Lady will be

Licence! Crathmocrawlo!—."[6] The lice-sense of the word seems to be "scratch-crawl," with a private, literary application (Coleridge goes on in the "Limbo" entry to write, "Cramp'd Crathmo crawls," and then to transform him into "Crawl, *whose earth-worm wit* lives under ground"). This is further confirmed by an extravagant February 1812 paragraph to the Morgans prompted by his dismay at picking up two lice from some squalid fellow-travelers on the Liverpool coach (the "lousy Liverpool," a mob of boys had hailed it—"And truly the Coach deserves it's honors") (*L* III, 367). He had dreamed that night of those two lice, Coleridge claimed; "The larger of the two was called SCRUBMOCREEPI, the other SCLAWMICRAULO," and in his dream they had plowed his back, "sowing Cow-itch in the furrows." Then, at the end of a succeeding itch-and-scratch dream, "the Devil was *rasping* me; when I awoke in the Fright and found that I had been furiously *sclawing* [my emphasis] my left Shoulder Bone—." Then Coleridge adds a postscript:

> Don't spake to henny wun, if u plaze, about them thare two Lousses, as I caut [on] my nek—becaze they may take the *license* to zay, has h[ow] I has more of the first sillybull in my ed, than the last. (*L* III, 369)

The jesting but genuine defensiveness of this postscript points up the weakness of Coleridge's humor at the beginning of the "Limbo" entry: it suffers from the very inadequacies it is attempting to satirize. These jokes, like Tungstic Acid's, are mere "Flea-skips and Flea-bites"; like Crawl's, his attempt at wit is but "some laborious Quibble" (*N* III.4073). In view of Johnson's priority with the basic witticism here, we may even conclude that Coleridge no less than Crathmocraulo "murders some dull Jest which he has caught from some other man."

II. From Nit-Wit to Donne-Puns

As his letter about the stagecoach lice makes clear, Coleridge was of two minds, appropriately enough, about puns. On the one hand, he shared something of the neoclassical sense of their ridiculousness, apologizing simply that punning "may be the lowest, but at all events is the most harmless, kind of wit, because it never excites envy."[7] In this vein his defense of punning—to which he recurs frequently during his Shakespeare lectures of 1811-12, near the time of writing "Limbo"—is on grounds of dramatic propriety: punning is sometimes "a natural expression of natural emotion" (II, 73), hence "a pun, if it be congruous with the feeling of the scene, is not only allowable in the dramatic dialogue, but oftentimes one of the most effectual intensives of passion"

(I, 136). All the same, there is something low-brow about it: often it arises as "the language of resentment, in order to express contempt—most common among the lower orders" (I, 20), and "No one can have heard quarrels among the vulgar but must have noticed the close connection of punning with angry contempt" (I, 35).

On the other hand, Coleridge was strongly inclined to value punning much more highly than these merely extenuating defenses would suggest, and repeatedly contemplates writing an actual "Apology for Puns."[8] He seems to find three characteristics of punning particularly admirable and valuable. First, fine punning bespeaks a finely logical mind. For a pun and the typical sophism have much in common: both are forms of equivocation. Thus one of Coleridge's main objectives in his *Aids to Reflection* is "to direct the Reader's attention to the value of the Science of Words, their use and abuse, and the incalculable advantages attached to the habit of using them appropriately, and with a distinct knowledge of their primary, derivative, and metaphorical senses," since "to expose a sophism and to detect the equivocal or double meaning of a word is, in the great majority of cases, one and the same thing."[9] "For by familiarizing the mind to *equivocal* expressions," he soon adds,

> we introduce confusion of thought, and furnish the sophist with his best and handiest tools. For the juggle of sophistry consists, for the greater part, in using a word in one sense in the premise, and in another sense in the conclusion.... [M]ake it a rule to ask yourself the precise meaning of the word on which the point in question appears to turn.... By this means, and scarcely without it, you will at length acquire a facility in detecting the *quid pro quo*. And . . . in so doing you will enable yourself to disarm and expose four-fifths of the main arguments of our most renowned irreligious philosophers, ancient and modern. For the *quid pro quo* is at once the rock and quarry on and with which the strongholds of disbelief, materialism, and (more pernicious still) epicurean morality are built. (pp. 24-25)

But to have developed this sensitivity to equivocations, of course, is also to have acquired the skill to manipulate them; and a pun, which by its nature intends no threat to morality, affords a harmless vent for this talent. Hence Coleridge's marginal observation in Richard Baxter's *Reliquiae Baxterianae* that

> Baxter, like most scholastic Logicians, had a sneaking affection for Puns. The cause is: the necessity of attending to the primary sense of words, i.e. the visual image or general relation exprest, & which remains common to all the after senses, however widely or even incongruously differing from each other in other respects.—For the same reason, School-masters are commonly Punsters. (*M* 1, 354)

Second, Coleridge suspects that puns, despite their superficial incongruousness, bespeak a fundamental, structural congruence within language itself. As he notes in *Aids to Reflection*, "There sometimes occurs an apparent *Play* on words, which not only to the Moralizer, but even to the philosophical Etymologist, appears more than a mere Play" (p. 33n). Thus

> All men who possess at once active fancy, imagination, and a philosophical Spirit, are prone to *Punning*; but with a presentiment, that the Pun itself is the buffoon Brutus concealing Brutus, the Consul. [Sometimes] a ridiculous likeness leads to the detection of a true analogy. (*M* I, 610)

And Coleridge was already speculating along these lines at the time of writing "Limbo." Barely a year before, he entered into one of his notebooks a reminder,

> N.B.—In my intended Essay in defence of Punning—(Apology for Paronomasy, alias Punning) to defend . . . by proving that Language itself is formed upon associations of this kind, that possibly the sensus genericus of whole classes of words may be thus decyphered, . . . that words are not mere symbols of things & thoughts, but themselves things—and that any harmony in the things symbolized will perforce be presented to us more easily as well as with additional beauty by a correspondent harmony of the Symbols with each other. (*N* III.3762)

Third, Coleridge acknowledges, at this extreme of intelligent punning, the sheer joy of the play: far from originating, as with the vulgar, in an angry contempt, the pun can instead express "exuberant activity of

mind, as in Shakespeare's higher comedy" (*ShC* I, 20). As he elsewhere proclaims of Shakespeare's wit in specific reference to his puns and conceits,

> The wit of Shakespeare is, as it were, like the flourishing of a man's stick, when he is walking, in the full flow of animal spirits: it is a sort of exuberance of hilarity which disburdens, and it resembles a conductor, to distribute a portion of our gladness to the surrounding air. While however it disburdens, it leaves behind what is weightiest and most important, and what most contributes to some direct aim and purpose. (*ShC* II, 91)

This vigorous exuberance, moreover, characterizes Donne's wit, to Coleridge's mind, no less than Shakespeare's. "Wonder-exciting vigour, intenseness and peculiarity of thought, using at will the almost boundless stores of a capacious memory, and exercised on subjects, where we have no right to expect it—this is the wit of Donne!" (*M* II, 17). Coleridge was in fact rereading and annotating Donne's poems at the very time he wrote "Limbo," and his marginalia repeatedly emphasize just this quality of abundant, luxuriant wit:

> this pride of doing what he likes with his own—fearless of an immense surplus to pay all lawful Debts to self-subsisting Themes that rule, while they create, the moral will—this is Donne! . . . [His is] the Impulse of a purse-proud Opulence, of innate Power! (*M* II, 220)[10]

And "in this lordliness of opulence, . . . *the* Positive of Donne agrees with *a* Positive of Shakespere" (*M* II, 219).

We find, then, that Coleridge recognizes a figuratively social or economic hierarchy of punning, ranging from the impoverished, mean outbursts of wit's vulgar commoners to the lordly opulence of its princes. But it is through just this hierarchy, from the starveling wits (and witticisms at the expense) of poor Crathmocraulo, Tungstic, and Tungtubig (as he soon adds in the notebook entry, "Huge Tungtubig has such a *hungry* Wit / That his Mouth waters at a lucky Hit") to the far richer ones of (and on) Shakespeare and Donne ("a noble Race of *Dons*") that Coleridge's notebook entry progresses on its way to "Limbo." And more: by examining this notebook entry in the context of Coleridge's many comments on puns and wit, we can see that Coleridge, however unconsciously, is developing an implicit but veritable iconography of

wit. His flea- and lice-puns here make part of a sustained pattern of allusion, whereby these insect vermin become very icons of inferior wit and bad puns.

We have already noted several examples of this association in Coleridge's letters. But consider now a cryptic complaint he enters in a journal without further comment in December 1805: "Lincoln! Aye—you may well call it Lincoln; for I was never so bit with Fleas in any place, in my whole Life" (*N* II.2751). This entry becomes intelligible to us only with the help of an explanation Coleridge provides in annotating, in his personal copy of his and Southey's *Omniana*, Southey's fragment on "Small Wit," which alludes to quibbles, puns, and punnets.[11] Coleridge elaborates.

> The Pun may be traced from its Minimum, in which it exists only in the violent intention and desire of the Punster to make one. This is the fluxion or pre-nascent Quantity, the Infinitesimal first Moment, or Differential, of a Pun—as that of the man who hearing Lincoln mentioned, grumbling most gutterally, shaking his head, and writhing his nose, muttered—"*Lin*c-oln, indeed! LINC-oln! *LINC*-coln! You may well call it *Link* coln!—a pause.—I was never so bit with Bugs in a place, in my whole Life before!"—Here the reason for vindictive anger striving to ease itself by Contempt—the most frequent origin of Puns, next to that of scornful Triumph exulting and insulting and see Parad. Lost, VI/or cause of the impulse or itch to let a pun was substituted for the Pun itself, which the man's wit could not light on. This therefore is the Minim.[12]

The Minim, indeed: slighter than Tungstic's flea-wit, akin but "pre-nascent" to Crathmocraulo's lice-sense, this is genuine nit-wit. And that it should be an "itch" unsuccessfully scratched (because he cannot "light on," catch or crack, the offending bug or the desired pun) bespeaks the louse not yet hatched, the nit: unlike even poor Crathmocraulo's thoughts, this would-be punster's cannot waken and crawl even if he scratches them, cannot even be murdered, but only aborted, because they have never been born.

It is fascinating, moreover, to find in Coleridge's continuation of his marginal note in *Omniana* a freakishly apt anticipation of his 1811 homage to Donne's first poem. In 1805 Coleridge says little to suggest he

perceives a social or economic hierarchy of puns; rather, verbal complexity affords his standard of value: "At the other extreme lies the Pun polysyllabic. . . ." But the example he immediately furnishes—and takes credit for—yet insinuates the intellectual and logical superiority, the elevated social status, and even the pun on "Dons" (and this even as a rhyme with "cons") so central in 1811:

> . . . the Pun polysyllabic—of which accept the following as a specimen: Two Nobles in *Madrid* were straddling side by side, / Both shamefully diseased: espying whom, I cried—What *figures* these men make! The Wight, that Euclid cons, / sees plainly that they are—Parallel o' *pippy*—Dons! S.T.C. (*N* II.2751n)

Thus just as fleas and lice forever sow their itch at the minim, vulgar extreme of Coleridgean punning, so, at the witty extreme, lords and logicians repeatedly vent their spirits.

A few months after writing his "Limbo" entry, Coleridge developed his ideas on puns, conceits, and wit at some length in his 1811-12 lectures on Shakespeare. At the center of his "defence of conceits and puns" (*ShC* II, 89), he advances a significant distinction between wit and fancy as an aid to appreciating Shakespeare's excellence:

> When the whole pleasure received is derived from surprise at an unexpected turn of expression, then I call it wit; but when the pleasure is produced not only by surprise, but also by an image which remains with us and gratifies for its own sake, then I call it fancy.
>
> (II,90-91)

The distinction is important for literary criticism, he further insists, in distinguishing between the merely talented "men of cleverness" who please by witty turns of phrase and the geniuses such as Shakespeare whose wit affords a more permanent pleasure. "There is a wide difference," Coleridge argues,

> between the talent which gives a sort of electric surprise by a mere turn of phrase, and that higher ability which produces surprise by a permanent medium, and always leaves something behind it, which satisfies the mind as well as tickles the hearing. (II, 91)

But the pun or conceit of the moment, that which transiently "tickles the hearing"—what is this but the proverbial irritant popularized by Rabelais, *la pusse en l'aureille* which tickles Panurge: a flea in one's ear?

III. "On Donne's first Poem"

Considering Coleridge's present involvement in his notebook entry with puns, wit, and fleas, his transition now to Donne's poem "The Flea" might seem almost inevitable. Coleridge himself, it is worth demurring, might not have thought the connection a merely associationalistic one. As he argued as early as 1803, "I almost think, that Ideas *never* recall Ideas, as far as they are Ideas—any more than Leaves in a forest create each other's motion—the Breeze it is that runs thro' them, / it is the Soul, the state of Feeling" (*L* II, 961). And we have already seen his claim that "all men who possess at once active fancy, imagination, and a philosophical Spirit, are prone to *Punning*." Still, the connection is there, and with apparent relief and initial high spirits Coleridge now drops his censorious, quasi-Johnsonian quibbles and suddenly begins a witty tribute entitled "On Donne's first Poem."

"The Flea" is Donne's "first" in the sense that it stands first in the edition of Donne's *Poems* (1669) which Coleridge was now reading and annotating. But this, like so many of the books Coleridge used as his own, was actually not his, but Lamb's—on whose "Wit . . . of the Flea kind" Coleridge has just been commenting. So Coleridge is consciously writing, not simply on Donne's first poem, but on Lamb's Donne's, and the connections linking this poem to this occasion are all the stronger.

Editors have found it difficult to say with any assurance where "On Donne's first Poem" ends, or even that it ends; the developing poem changes markedly in tone and finally gives way to "Limbo," which it seems both to introduce and to inspire. But certainly E. H. Coleridge's extraction of a twelve-line "jeux d'esprit" was arbitrary and misleading. The poem Coleridge actually wrote is certainly longer and, at least in its later lines, far from playful:

On Donne's first Poem

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

What tho' that great ancestral Flea be gone
Immortal with immortalizing Donne—
His earthly Spots bleach'd off as Papists gloze,
In purgatory fire on Bardolph's Nose,
Or else starved out, his aery tread defied
By the dry Potticary's bladdery Hide,
Which cross'd unchang'd and still keeps in ghost-Light
Of lank Half-nothings his, the thinnest Sprite
The sole true *Something* this in Limbo Den
It frightens Ghosts as Ghosts here frighten men—
Thence cross'd unraz'd and shall, some fated Hour,
Be pulverized by Demogorgon's Power
And given as poison, to annilate Souls—
Even now it shrinks them! 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.

The first, conventionally witty half of this poem or fragment presents no obscurities to match those of the later lines, but even so a few points may merit particular attention. The punning on Donne's name ("a noble Race of *Dons*"), for example, originally employed, of course, by Donne himself in "A Hymne to God the Father" ("When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more") and, according to Walton, in his letter to his wife when he was dismissed from Sir Thomas Egerton's service ("John Donne, Anne Donne, Un-done"), here extends to the first name as well (young Jack Donne of the amorous *Songs and Sonnets*, soberer John Donne of the middle years). This involves moreover a continuation of the play on fleas: a skip-jack, in Donne's time "a pert shallow-brained fellow . . . a conceited fop or dandy" (*OED*), is also the name for what Americans call a click-beetle, itself no mean insect jumper, though not in the same league with the flea (Hans Christian Andersen would later group a flea, a grasshopper, and a skip-jack in "The Jumping Contest"). The fleas' "living bronze," too, may echo an ancient ambition: here, after all, might be that *monumentum aere perennius* to which the great poet aspires. And the superficial "Papists gloze" to which the "earthly Spots" of Donne's flea are likened suggests a pointed characterization of Donne himself, whom Coleridge judged somewhat marred as a Church of England divine by occasional Catholic tendencies: as he later commented of a passage in one of Donne's sermons, "papam redolet."[13]

Coleridge's allusion to Donne's flea's chastening "in purgatory fire on Bardolph's Nose" renews his association of Donne's wit with Shakespeare's, and does so by way of a figure which, as we know from his contemporaneous lectures on Shakespeare, Coleridge particularly admired:

> I appeal to the recollection of those who hear me, whether the greater part of what passes for wit in Shakespeare, is not most exquisite humour, heightened by a figure, and attributed to a particular character? Take the instance of the flea on Bardolph's nose, which Falstaff compares to a soul suffering in purgatory. The images themselves, in cases like this, afford a great part of the pleasure. (*ShC* II, 91)

Now Coleridge is using Shakespeare's instance to pay a compliment to Donne's "The Flea." But other issues also resonate in the wit here. For one, there is the purgatorial nature of that fire. This purging of wit's and life's dross fits the compliment to Donne so appropriately that we might think it a deliberate revision of Shakespeare's image—for Shakespeare actually had Falstaff specify a very different kind of fire: as the boy reminisces after Falstaff's death, "Do you not remember, a' saw a flea stick upon Bardolph's nose, and a' said it was a black soul burning in hell-fire?"[14] But Coleridge's mistaken mention of purgatory when he cites the witticism in his Shakespeare lecture prompts the misgiving that Donne's flea burns in fire not of revision but of misprision. And this doubt is compounded by Coleridge's curious, even perverse blurring, inexplicable in one of his theological learning save as sheer willfulness or disregard, of Purgatory and Limbo.

With the crossing of Donne's now-immortal flea from this world to Limbo, Coleridge's poem itself assumes a certain aura of "ghost-Light," a shadowy indistinctness of which the blurring of Limbo and Purgatory is symptomatic. What are crossed are the several boundary rivers of the underworld, as an insertion appended later in the entry makes clear.[15] After death, the flea follows the classical route to the realm of the dead, a shadow of its former self. This is one of those improbable coincidences which occasionally enliven literary history: some seven years before William Blake saw and sketched his fearsome "Ghost of a Flea," Coleridge had introduced that ghost into "Limbo."

The coming of Demogorgon represents a classical version of the Second Coming, the end of time. But why should the flea represent the

ultimate poison to the doomed? Here, I think, Coleridge is extending his jesting application of Donne. In Donne's *Biathanatos*, which Coleridge had been recently reading (as a March 1811 notebook entry indicates; N III.4050), we find the following:

> . . . Ardoynus, reckoning up all poisons which have a natural malignity and affection to destroy man's body, forbears not a flea, though it never kill, because it endeavors it, and doth all the hurt it can. . . .[16]

The Falstaffian chop-logic of this categorization accords finely with Coleridge's wit here. He therefore literalizes the idea, foreseeing the flea "pulverized by Demogorgon's Power" as by an apothecary with a mortar and pestle, thus taking advantage of the tradition presenting Demogorgon as a supreme alchemist who will ultimately destroy the world by means of a disintegrative potion.[17]

Coleridge seems simply to posit Donne's flea as that which the ghosts of Limbo fear, "the sole true *Something*" in this realm of "Half-nothings."[18] His subsequent comparison of these frightened ghosts to moles indicates something of the nature of their fear. In his 1818 edition of *The Friend*, Coleridge quotes (and first publishes) these five lines on moles as illustrating the aversion and inward alarm which "the partizans of a crass and sensual materialism" feel when confronted by evidence of spiritual light whose existence they have denied.[19] So Coleridge later celebrates Berengarius in his controversy with his monkish opponents as a "lynx among moles!"[20] Donne himself may well have suggested the image of materialist as mole to Coleridge, for he touches intriguingly near it in *Biathanatos*: "And as Cardan says that metal is *planta sepulta*, and that a mole is *animal sepultum*, so man, as though he were *angelus sepultus*, labors to be discharged of his earthly sepulchre, his body."[21] And their "shrinking" from the light, and from the nihilism with which it threatens them, is reminiscent of a soliloquy in Addison's *Cato* on which Coleridge had recently been meditating:

> . . . whence this pleasing hope, this fond desire,
> This longing after immortality?
> Or whence this secret dread, and inward horror,
> Of falling into nought? Why shrinks the soul
> Back on herself, and startles at destruction?
> 'Tis the divinity that stirs within us;
> 'Tis heaven itself that points out an hereafter,
> And intimates eternity to man. . . . (V.i.2-9)[22]

As Cato declares they must, even these materialists' souls shrink in dread from the flea-borne intimation of their "falling into nought."

That these moles—creatures not blind, but sighted in darkness rather than in light, creatures of a "negative Eye"—should be explicitly monkish, moreover, points to a specifically theological dimension of Coleridge's satire, evident also in his later characterization of Berengarius's opponents as moles. Blindness or darkness alone Coleridge readily took as a figure for ignorance or superstition; but that negative sight which discovered opacity in transparency, darkness in light, had for him particular intimations of theological sophistry. Thus did

> the Romish Commentators . . . find in so many a lucid text of Scripture as many strange Senses in sanction of their Church Whimsies, Sacraments and sub-sacraments, as Katterfelto by his Solar Microscope found animals, large as his black Cat, in a drop of transparent Water—. . . . (*M* I, 519)

Of such negative sight fanatical Protestant freethinkers with their wholly private and fragmented interpretations of scripture were equally guilty:

> The mysteries, which these spiritual Lynxes detect in the simplest texts, remind me of the 500 nondescripts, each as large as his own black cat, which Dr. Katterfelto, by aid of his solar microscope, discovered in a drop of transparent water. . . . Let them . . . attend to the golden aphorisms of the old and orthodox divines. " Sentences in scripture (says Dr Donne) like hairs in horsetails, concur in one root of beauty and strength; but being *plucked out, one by one, serve only for springes and snares.*"[23]

Curiously, negative vision thus seems closely related to microscopic vision. He who so sees a flea might well shrink before it—for it, reciprocally, looms hugely before him.

Ghosts as moles, then, and moles as monks; but why also as "live Mandrakes of the ground"? The epithet is unexceptionably Donnean, of course; but its introduction here also prompts other resonances, and can guide us, as indeed it may well have guided Coleridge, to new dimensions of wit and punning in this poem. In 1808, while rereading and annotating Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Coleridge came across the following in Browne's observations "Of Sundry Tenents Concerning Vegetables or Plants . . .":

> Many Mola's and 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 . . . (II.vi.1)

—on which Coleridge commented, "See Donne's *Metempsych.*" (*M* I, 776), referring to Donne's extensive use of the conceit in "The Progress of the Soul (Metempsychosis)," lines 131-60. Browne is himself punning here: a mola, or mole, is literally a false conception—a mooncalf, an abortive, fleshy mass in the womb—while Browne happily appropriates the word in the figurative sense of "mistaken notion." Coleridge's remembrance of the mandrake in Donne's "The Progress of the Soul," moreover ("This living buried man, this quiet mandrake" [l. 160]), might well have suggested an association with the mole, *animal sepultum*, mentioned in Donne's *Biathanatos*. But beyond these perhaps all too tenuous connections, how very aptly this subliminal mola-mole pun informs "Limbo"! For according to Catholic doctrine, the destiny and otherworldly place of molas is none other than limbo, the *Limbus Infantum*.

And what is a pun but a particular type of false conception, a mooncalf of rhetoric?

IV. False Conception

> Now you will think what follows a Lie—& it is not. I asked a stupid haughty fool, who is the Librarian of the Dean & Chapter's Library in this city [Durham], if he had Leibnitz. He answered—"We have no Museum in this Library for natural curiosities; but there is a mathematical Instrument-seller in the town, who shews such [an]imalcula thro' a glass of great magnifying powers." Heaven & Earth!—he understood the word "*live Nits.*" (Coleridge to Robert Southey, 25 July 1801 [*L* II, 747])

True, there is something sadly molish about this Durham librarian. On the other hand, what if Coleridge had approached a museum curator to inquire after live nits,[24] and had been misunderstood to say (for of course, the man reasons, this is *Coleridge*, the great German's admirer; he *must* have said) "Leibnitz"?

Critics of Donne have long since striven to reconcile Jack Donne and the famed Dean of St. Paul's as aspects of one sensibility. Students of Coleridge confront a similar challenge. I am not confident that we have

yet met it altogether adequately. Like my hypothetical curator, when we attend on Coleridge we are perhaps a shade too ready to hear "Leibnitz."

Part of the fascination of the "Limbo" entry is that it yokes such apparently heterogeneous extremes of Coleridge's sensibility so very closely, yet without significantly transforming either. Coleridge's poem on Donne, unlike its flea protagonist, when it crosses into "Limbo" *does* change, and change drastically—if not from the ridiculous to the sublime, yet from something compatible with Spy Nosy and Live Nits to something aspiring to Spinoza and Leibnitz. In the process, moreover, Donne disappears entirely: like a catalyst, he prompts the reaction but makes no part of the new product.[25]

But if "On Donne's First Poem" offers little help in explicating "Limbo," it has much to teach us about how Coleridge distinguishes wit's value from its dross. "On Donne's First Poem" is itself the limbo, the purgative border region, of wit's passage through this notebook entry. Here the half-nothings of inferior wit give way to the greater power of the sole true wit, wit which bespeaks a congruence deeper than that of sound, a true analogy beneath the superficial, ridiculous likeness. Thus Coleridge's discrimination of lower wit ("a mere combination of words," "turns of phrase which, . . . passing away the moment, are passed in a moment, being no longer recollected than the time they take in utterance") from higher wit ("a combination of images" which "always leaves something behind it, which satisfies the mind as well as tickles the hearing") importantly anticipates his crucial discrimination of allegory from symbol. Like the superficial allegories Coleridge condemned, inferior puns "are but empty echoes," "counterfeit product[s] of the mechanical understanding"; like symbols, superior puns "partake of the reality which [they] render intelligible," and are "harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*" (*SM* 30, 29).[26]

Here, then, is an answer to my earlier, not merely rhetorical question, What is a pun but a mooncalf of rhetoric? An inferior pun, indeed, is no more than this. But if the witty conception, however surprising, is yet lasting, suggestive of a deeper truth, and "gratif[ying] for its own sake" (*ShC* II, 91), Coleridge implies, then the pun is no stillbirth or mola, but rhetoric's foundling, or even her own true child.

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Notes

[1] I. A. Richards, ed., *The Portable Coleridge* (New York: Viking, 1950), pp. 37, 44, 51; Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 117, 190; Harold Bloom, ed., *Selected Poetry*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (New York: New American Library, 1972), p. 16.

[2] For a sustained examination of "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra" in the context of the entire notebook entry see Edward Kessler, *Coleridge's Metaphors of Being* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 90-120.

[3] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957-), III.4073. Hereafter *N*.

[4] Coburn cites this Boswell passage with reference to what I take to be a related entry fourteen pages later in this same notebook, when Coleridge jots down a brief memo "On a bettermost sort of Remark of Dr Johnson's recorded by Boswell—a notable Flea-skip for so grave a Bug" (*N* III.4104). I see no need to assume, as Coburn does, that Coleridge is here in entry 4104 alluding to this particular passage in Boswell as the "Remark" in question. Rather, he is turning the spirit of it upon Johnson himself, whom Coleridge did not value especially highly: Johnson is the "grave bug" nonetheless capable of an occasional "flea-skip" of wit.

Coburn thinks entry 4104 dates from August, 1811, roughly three months after the "Limbo" entry.

[5] A few years after this, in *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge suggests that "the habit of perusing periodical works may be properly added to Averrhoe's catalogue of ANTI-MNEMONICS, or weakeners of the memory"—the first of which, in Coleridge's Latinized recitation, is "Pediculos e capilla excerptos in arenam incontusos" (*Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter J. Bate [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983], I, 49 and n; hereafter *BL*). (Coleridge had first noted this catalogue [not actually by Averrhoes] a year before drafting "Limbo" and in the same notebook, there idiomatically translating the phrase as "throwing Lice upon the ground without cracking them" [*N* III.3750]). The reviews in such journals, then, are figuratively lice. Typically, too, Coleridge accuses, they dwell not on characteristic merits or flaws, but on lapses and trifles: "Omit or pass slightly over, the expression, grace, and grouping of Raphael's *figures*; but ridicule in *detail* the knitting-needles and broom-twigs, that are to represent trees in his back grounds; and never let him hear the last of his *galli-pots*!" (*BL* I, 61). What would we call this, if not nit-picking?

The *OED*, be it noted, cites no instance of "nitpicker" earlier than 1951 (*OED Supplement* II, 1213).

[6] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956-71), III, 459. Hereafter *L*.

[7] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Dent, 1960), II, 104. Hereafter *ShC*.

[8] Coleridge is meditating an "intended Essay in defence of Punning" in April-June 1810 (*N* III.3762). In 1811, at about the time he composes "Limbo," he alludes in a marginal note to "an Essay, I have written, called an 'Apology for Puns'" (*Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980-], II, 238; hereafter *M*). Though we know of no such essay, there are several sustained and connected passages building toward such an apology in his 1811-12 Shakespeare lectures; see *ShC* II, 73, 88-90, 104-05, 143-45.

[9] *Aids to Reflection*, ed. Thomas Fenby (London: Routledge, n.d.), p. xiii ("The Author's Preface"). Hereafter *AR*.

[10] At the end of the volume, Coleridge dates his annotations "2 May, 1811" (*M* I, cxxi). I would note of this passage, incidentally, that Raysor, when he earlier transcribed it, quoted Coleridge as saying here that these themes "rule, while they *cannot* create, the moral will" (*Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor [London: Constable, 1936], p. 137; my emphasis).

[11] Robert Southey and S. T. Coleridge, *Omniana, or Horae Otiosiores*, ed. Robert Gittings (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 71-72.

[12] *N* II.2751n. Cf. *M* II, 239: "N.B. Malice the Mother of bad Puns; & Sport the Father: vide Par. Lost, Book VI."

[13] *M* II, 313. For other comments on Donne's "strong *patristic* leaven" (II, 260), see also, e.g., II, 272, 301, 304.

[14] *Henry V* II.iii. Falstaff is actually quite persistent in this comparison. In *I Henry IV*, for example, he says to Bardolph, "I never see thy face but I think upon hell-fire, and Dives that lived in purple: for there he is in his robes, burning" (III.iii.29-32), and in *II Henry IV* adds, "The fiend hath pricked down Bardolph irrecoverable, and his face is Lucifer's privy-kitchen, where he doth nothing but

roast malt-worms" (II.iv.329-31). This latter figure, with its pun on vermin, "malt-worms" (weevils which infest malt; figuratively, topers), closely anticipates Coleridge's later flea-puns no less than Falstaff's.

"Bardolph's nose" also had private associations with punning for Coleridge. In 1796 a government spy who happened to have a prominent nose—Coleridge himself terms it a "Bardolph nose"—was dispatched to Alfoxden to investigate Coleridge and Wordsworth for evidence of jacobin sympathies. He shadowed them for some time, only to discover that their talk was not of politics but of books:

> He had repeatedly hid himself, he said, for hours together behind a bank at the sea-side (our favorite seat) and overheard our conversation. At first he fancied, that we were aware of our danger; for he often heard me talk of one *Spy Nozy*, which he was inclined to interpret of himself, and of a remarkable feature belonging to him; but he was speedily convinced that it was the name of a man who had made a book and lived long ago. (*BL* I, 193-94)

"Spy Nozy"/Spinoza, itself compounding the quibble on the "nosy" spy, chimes very aptly indeed with the spirit of "On Donne's First Poem."

The private relevance of "Bardolph's nose" may not be an isolated instance here. Possibly "On Donne's First Poem" is privately significant in numerous ways, just as the preceding comments on Crathmocraulo and Tungstic seem to be. It is interesting to note, for example, that Coleridge's friend John Morgan was referred to by Lamb ("Tungstic") as "Morgan Demogorgon" (*The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas [London: Methuen, 1903], I, 522n). Too, the "Limbo" entry comes barely half a year after Coleridge's devastating quarrel with Wordsworth, "compared with the sufferings of which all former Afflictions of my Life were less than Flea-bites," as he would write early in 1813 (*L* III, 437). This last flea-allusion by itself seems all too tenuously relevant to the "Limbo" entry, certainly; but an anguished cry to Wordsworth earlier about the disparagement which had provoked the breach—"but that *you* had said it, this & this only, was the sting! the Scorpion-tooth!" (*L* II, 399)—also echoes the entry (line 3 of "Ne Plus Ultra" speaks of the "primal scorpion rod"). And further, insofar as the poem's "dry Potticary" with his bladders may seem vaguely reminiscent of the Apothecary of *Romeo and Juliet* V.i, we should remember how frequently during these years Coleridge explicitly or figuratively identifies himself with that Apothecary (*L* III, 327, 348; *ShC* II, 163; *N* III.4158; *Omniana*, p. 328). While I do not think that we can grasp any sustained autobiographical significance here, neither would I be completely confident that there is none.

[15] Or is it meaningful to say "makes clear" when all here is so muddled and obscure? The addendum is as follows:

> For skimming in the wake, it mock'd the care
> Of the Old Boat-God for his Farthing Fare,
> Tho' Irus' Ghost itself he neer frown'd blacker on,
> The skin and skin-pent Druggist crost the Acheron,
> Styx and with Puriphlegethon Cocytus:
> The very names, methinks, might thither fright us—
> Unchang'd it cross'd & shall &c.

Though the tone of Coleridge's Limbo owes more to Milton (*Paradise Lost* III) than to Vergil or Dante, the sequence of rivers here is Dante's.

The flea's "skimming in the wake" of Charon's boat is, I take it, another turn of Coleridge's earlier "skip-jack" pun: for while "skip-jack" denotes the click-beetle, it is also the familiar name for various fish which habitually jump out of the water.

[16] John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin, Garland English Texts, 1 (New York and London: Garland, 1982), p. 130 (II.vi.7).

[17] The tradition is no ancient one, but does appear, for example, in the comic *Tales of the Genii* (1764), by James Ridley (1736-65). In the first tale, "The Talisman of Oromanes," the protagonist encounters an alchemist who claims to be preparing "the universal menstruum," "the key of nature," a liquor which "gave the great Demogorgon power to dissolve all nature" (Sir Charles Morell [pseud. of James Ridley], *The Tales of the Genii* [London, 1820], I, 88, 87, 84). Significantly, Coleridge alludes specifically and familiarly to *The Tales of the Genii* in a May 1810 note (*N* III.3823), and clearly knew the book by then. John Beer, while not taking note of this 1810 reference, points out that Ridley's book is a likely source for "Kubla Khan," and accordingly suggests

that Coleridge was familiar with it by 1797 (*Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], p. 19).

[18] A wild but not, in the present context, inappropriate explanation might be that the flea is so fearsome because he carries Donne's blood. This Limbo, as we shall see, is a realm reserved for mere materialists, those who derive all truths from the senses only. But the flea which fed on Donne introduces there the blood of one a "natural Alien" to such a philosophy, one who proclaims the falseness of their assumptions. Hence, perhaps, Coleridge's odd reference to the flea crossing into Limbo as "The skin and skin-pent Druggist": what is "skin-pent" is Donne's blood inside the flea, and it is this which will make the pulverized flea so deadly a drug to the ghosts.

[19] *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), I, 494.

[20] "Lines Suggested by the Last Words of Berengarius," l. 5.

[21] Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 64 (I.ii.3). Coleridge's actual presentation of these moles may well owe something to Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, which Coleridge was rereading in 1808. In his chapter "Of Moles, or Molls," Browne writes,

> they are not blind, nor yet distinctly see; . . . they have sight enough to discern the light, though not perhaps to distinguish of objects or colours. . . . And this (as Scaliger observeth) might be as full a sight as Nature first intended, for living in darkness under the earth, they had no further need of eyes than to avoid the light; and to be sensible when ever they lost that darkness of earth, which was their natural confinement. (*The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964], II, 220 [*Pseudodoxia Epidemica* III, 18])

Browne's observations are not unique, of course; but his work seems all the more likely to have been in Coleridge's mind here in that it proceeds to discuss the mole's putative blindness in precisely those terms of "negation" and "privation" on which Coleridge so plays in "Limbo":

> And lastly, although they had neither eyes nor sight, yet could they not be termed blind. For blindness being a privative term unto sight, this appellation is not admittible in propriety of speech, and will overthrow the doctrine of privations; which presuppose positive forms or habits, and are not indefinite negations. . . .

[22] Coleridge had hoped to see *Cato* performed on 16 March 1811 (not, as Coburn says, 16 May), and alluded to this particular soliloquy from the play in a notebook entry of 2 April 1811 (*N* III.4061 and n). The entry, on the immortality of the soul, is pointedly relevant to this section of "Limbo":

> —in giving man therefore *prospective* Thoughts, *any* future at all, Nature compels him to think himself immortal—especially, when to this we add the unimaginability of passing from Something to Nothing, between which there is no medium . . . or of believing in a negative—& this too, a negative of that Positive which is the perpetual presence of our Being, and the menstruum of all our Thoughts, Feelings, Acts, & Experiences—.

"Limbo," after all, is an exercise in positing that medium between Something and Nothing (Coleridge will towards the end of the poem characterize Limbo as a condition of "growthless dull *Privation*" between the Something of life and the Nothing of "blank Nought at all," "*positive Negation*").

[23] *Omniana*, p. 179. Cf. *M* II, 285, where Coleridge mentions Katterfelto to the same purpose in commenting on one of Donne's sermons.

[24] Is the situation so unimaginable or even far-fetched? Remembering Coleridge's habitual eye for minute observations, his attendance upon his friend Humphrey Davy's work in chemistry, his various amateur experiments and investigations—

> my hands are scarred with scratches from a cat, whose back I was rubbing in the dark in order to see whether the sparks from it were refrangible by a prism. (*L* II, 714)

> N.B. What do the humblebees do in those small hollow funnels they make? Often they put their hind Half and orange plush small-clothes in these funnels and move backward and forward ovi-position. I, however, could

> never find any the least speck even with a glass in the bottom of the funnel. (*Inquiring Spirit*, ed. Kathleen Coburn [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951], p. 243)

—remembering all this, I do not hesitate to conjure up such a scene.

[25] Coburn claims that "the theme of hell as privation" so prominent in "Limbo" comes from Donne's poem "To Mr T. W." ("Hast thee harsh verse"), which states in line 9, "And 'tis decreed our hell is but privation" (*N* III.4073n). As I have noted above, however, a more likely immediate source is Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (see note 21 above). Indeed, a particular source is hardly presumable: as James D. Boulger points out, the concepts of privation and negation are common in Christian theology, and Coleridge's line in "Limbo": "A lurid thought is growthless dull Privation" "corresponds to Aquinas' standard definition, *Malum . . . neque est sicut habitus, neque sicut pura negatio, sed sicut privatio*" (*Coleridge as Religious Thinker* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961], p. 203 and n).

There is in fact another possible allusion to Donne's poetry in an earlier "Limbo" figure, "unmeaning they / As Moonlight on the Dial of the Day": cf. Donne's "all your graces no more use shall have / Than a sun-dial in a grave" ("The Will," ll. 50-51). But the image of "a sun-dial by moonlight" appears several times in Coleridge (*Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972], p. 57; *M* II, 561) and Donne's figure in any event is hardly unique: in *Tristram Shandy*, for example, Tristram likens his father's work on the *Tristra-paedia* to "drawing a sun-dial, for no better purpose than to be buried under ground" (V.16).

[26] *Lay Sermons*, pp. 30, 29. With this last characterization of symbols as *conductors* compare Coleridge's description of "the wit of Shakespeare," which we have already considered in another light:

> it is a sort of exuberance of hilarity which disburdens, and it resembles a conductor, to distribute a portion of our gladness to the surrounding air. While, however, it disburdens, it leaves behind what is weightiest and most important, and what most contributes to some direct aim and purpose. (*ShC* II, 91)

For a fuller examination of the ties between allegory and symbol (corresponding to those between lower and higher wit), see John A. Hodgson, "Transcendental Tropes: Coleridge's Rhetoric of Allegory and Symbol," in *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield, Harvard English Studies 9 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 273-92. For an important examination of "the essential affinity of allegory to the pivotal phenomenon of the pun," see Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), esp. pp. 25-96 (the quotation is from p. 33).