

Reading *Alice du Clós*, and for the birds

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"I believe in pure explication de texte.
This may in fact be my principal form of piety."
Wallace Stevens¹

1. *Preamble*

1.1. *ALICE DU CLÓS*, LIKE THE FIRST OF POUND'S CANTOS, begins in the middle of its story. Yet, while Pound's last words are "So that", pointing to a narrative that goes on beyond the text, Coleridge concludes decisively with the death of the protagonist. The end arrives so suddenly that a reader must inevitably pause to catch up with the events that lead up to Alice's death, but the situation is unusual. The moment the fast-moving narrative concludes, the meanings it has gathered within itself and from other sources begin to unravel in slow-motion. Perhaps a better comparison than Canto I is Beckett's short story, *Dante and the Lobster*, which ends:

Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.
It is not.²

Coleridge does not intervene directly like this. He brings us up short by an ending that might appear to contradict every feeling his narrative has elicited, every nuance a reader of his other poems might have picked up. And we may afterwards be troubled to learn that the sleight of hand involved is duplicitous, more characteristic of the villain here than the heroine.

1.2. In such ways *Alice du Clós* is unlike any other poem Coleridge wrote. Although it draws upon deep-rooted concerns that caused him anxiety and remained raw throughout his adult life, no other poem dispatches them with such brio. Why a finish that closes like a trap? Is the neatness of construction — the pared-down efficiency of the poem's working — a sign of impatience or even levity? How does a reader square the sympathies elicited by the narrative with the way they appear to be turned upside-down — written off — by the plot? Was Coleridge contriving to affront or discomfort us? to provoke?

1.3. The sense of a conclusive ending that brings us up short in a narrative that

¹ To Bernard Heringman, 21 July 1953: *Letters of Wallace Stevens* ed. Holly Stevens (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) 793. I must thank Peter Cheyne and Graham Davidson for their careful readings of an earlier version of my explication, both of whom improved it measurably.

² *More Pricks Than Kicks* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1934) 20. When Barry McGovern sent Beckett a copy of his taped reading of the story, Beckett suggested the last line should run "Like hell it is."

could have gone on as the *Ancient Mariner* does after the shooting of the albatross — that is simultaneously more and less of an ending than we have been led to expect — is closely connected to the way the plot turns on a pun. The stories of romance that kept Alice up all night entrap and destroy her when they are misreported; or, more accurately, when they are reported in such a literal manner that her situation is misunderstood. The use of the word “page” with two meanings — each separately innocent — becomes suddenly lethal when they are confused; and the shock we feel becomes a devouring irony when we reflect that the evil messenger who set the scene for Alice’s destruction has done no more than the poet who, with his rhymes and half-rhymes, has used words in the same way to establish our sense of her innocence; an innocence that in retrospect contains fault-lines and slippages.³ The pun opens a chasm under the rounded narrative by means identical with the way the entire poem works — modifying meanings by linking sounds, sometimes by rhymes that twist the sense — and the treachery of language underlines the blocked communication between Julian and Alice.

1.4. There is little evidence in the history of commentary that Coleridge’s poem has been carefully or appreciatively read but it possesses an interest as a piece of writing remarkable for its skill, subtlety and directness.⁴ Ballads held a special attraction for him as a form, yet beginning them proved easier than finishing them off. An eminent literary historian with a broad view of the subject singled out *Alice du Clós* as Coleridge’s most successful piece of work of its kind, “an *Othello* in little”:

This poem shows what the ballad might be in the hands of a good poet who would take the pains to deal with it freely and sincerely.⁵

At the same time, complete achievement and impressive though it is, it puts themes that occupied Coleridge from the beginning of his writing-life into a new perspective. The sparks that fly from *Alice du Clós* — the elements of surprise — are demonstrably of the same kind we meet in *The Eolian Harp*, *Frost at Midnight* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. At the same time, themes and aspects of style overlap poems written later, at the end of his writing-life, like *The Improvisatore* and *The Garden of Boccaccio*. All round, we have a poem that performs a somersault, leaving Coleridge’s central preoccupations intact, in their place but trembling.

³ Discussed with further references by Debra Fried “Rhyme Puns” in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 83-99.

⁴ The poem found favour during the half-century between 1860 and 1910 (e.g. in the selections by A. C. Swinburne 1869, Joseph Skipsey 1884, Stopford Brooke 1895, Frederick Ellis 1896, Alice Meynell 1905 and Quiller-Couch 1907). It was omitted from the most widely-circulated selections during most of the twentieth century (e.g. by Stephen Potter 1935 and I. A. Richards 1950, Elisabeth Schneider 1951 and Kathleen Raine 1957, William Empson 1972 and John Beer 1996). The selections by H. J. Jackson (1985 and 1994) followed by Richard Holmes (1996 and 2003), in this respect at least, show a sign of recovery.

⁵ Sigurd B. Hustvedt *Ballad Books and Ballad Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930) 99.

1.5. It is important that an element of trickery is central. As in a Maupassant or O. Henry story, we are plunged into a situation that develops in real time with little opportunity to think outside it. The action advances through the uncertain period while dawn turns into day, as if within the mesmerised time we take to read. We are transported in space from a garden bower to a nearby woodland glade, and the second scene is superimposed on the first. The sense of elision is further increased by the small cast of characters — just four, who are in turn made up of two pairs — a lord and his attendant knight, a lady and her attendant squire. As I said, the working of the plot, the thoughts and feelings of the characters, come together with a speed and force that absorbs our whole attention. The pun that fashions the catastrophe comes out of the blue but, once seen, we understand it has lurked in the shadows and was always there. Or one could say the terminating pun echoes earlier sounds that have remained suspended within what we read. The process continues and remains the troubling subject of our thought; a thrust contained by and reverberating beyond the poem itself.

2. Narrative

2.1. A story-element is prominent in all ballads: usually one that can be told without much ado and quickly grasped. *Alice du Clós* conforms to tradition but turns on itself in the way I have described. Indeed, it is more like a modern short story in concentrating on the climactic moment, leaving the previous action to be understood by glimpses. The narrative breaks in on us like an urgent interruption and we are assailed by a request that is more like a command and told that we ignore it at our peril:

“The Sun is not yet risen
But the Dawn lies red on the dew:
Lord Julian has stolen from the Hunters’ away,
Is seeking, Lady! for You.

* * *

O Lady! throw your Book aside!
I would not that my Lord should chide.”

2.2. Only afterwards do we discover that the speaker is the “Vassal Knight” Sir Hugh and the Lady is Alice, in some unconfirmed way his master’s betrothed. He has been reported by an unnamed narrator who then, speaking in her own voice, at once digresses into a description of Alice’s private world. It is a world of calm whose qualities are heightened as they contrast with the rough intrusion they follow, while retrospectively the sense of Hugh’s affrontery is increased. The narrator’s description of Alice extends in a way that continues to emphasise her innocence and vulnerability, making even clearer that Hugh has added insult to his task; and, when Alice comes to reply, we pick up with her threatened feelings. She dismisses him in forthright terms but trembles

inwardly. He, for his part, crude and offensive as he is, carries away a disquieting sense of power and satisfaction in having achieved an unstated purpose:

Like a huge billow from a Bark
 Toil'd in the deep Sea-trough

 That shouldering sideways in mid plunge
 Is travers'd by a Flash:
 And staggering onward leaves the Ear
 With dull and distant Crash.

2.3. When we turn back to the troubled Alice, there is a sudden change. Within the space of the following five-line stanza, with no explanation (unless she felt her “Scoff” had been too fierce), she recovers her spirits and follows the instructions she has been given. She dresses to join Lord Julian in “her Dress of Green, | Her Buskins and her Quiver,” and we plunge into playtime. She is a child again, even younger than previously suggested, and, when she calls her youthful squire, Florian, she has a companion to share the fun (note his matching “quiver” in line 90). They stop for a moment to watch the sun rise on their setting out. It is an important transition, already poignant and fated to become more so. They are leaving behind a world of dreams to enter an adult masculine world of hunting.

2.4. Another small intrusion interrupts the narrative advance. The narrator explains that the place where Alice has been told to join Lord Julian has been altered to one that better suits a neighbour knight: not much further away but “A green and lightsome Glade” in the forest instead of a “Covert Lane”. The narrator also takes the opportunity to describe how Julian experiences an odd difficulty in absorbing this change of plan. His failure to find good reason not to agree to the change has a decidedly unusual effect:

He bit his lip, he wrung his Glove,
 He look'd around, he look'd above;
 But pretext none could find or frame!

Such prevarication and the mental disturbance it causes helps introduce his character and the scene that follows. An uncertain tyrant!

2.5. Sir Hugh arrives in the open glade and carefully postpones delivering the reply his Lord is waiting for. This of course only disturbs Julian's spirits the more:

“God's Wrath! Speak out, Man!” Julian cried,
 O'ermaster'd by the sudden Smart:
 And feigning wrath, sharp, blunt and rude

The Knight his subtle Shift pursued —

With false reluctance Hugh then reports Alice's response in a fashion that — while word for word accurate — is selective and utterly misrepresents her meaning. The repetition of Julian's word "Wrath" at first glance looks clumsy, but it foreshadows his reapplication of Alice's word "wanton" to her squire. The young pair break merrily onto the scene, their horses galloping out of control. Julian swallows the bait, believes Alice has spent the night in dalliance with Florian, hurls his hunting lance at Alice, end of story.

The shaft was hurl'd!—a lifeless corse,
Fair Alice from her vaulting horse,
Lies bleeding on the glade.

3. *Characters in action*

3.1. While Coleridge's poem can be compared to a modern short story, the parts can be said to move like contiguous scenes in a one-act play, achieving urgency by conforming to the Classical unities of time, place and action. In this respect, it justifies the comparison with the shortest, most perfectly wrought of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello*, cited above. The leading figures in the two texts indeed bear more than a passing resemblance; that is, Lord Julian, Sir Hugh and Alice when set against Othello, Iago and Desdemona. However, differences quickly arise when the comparison is pressed, as Coleridge probably intended. If one must suppose an allusion, it works in the same diminishing way as the pun.

3.2. Sir Hugh obviously resembles Iago in the way he deceives his master into destroying the woman he loves but his malignity is not, like Iago's, motiveless. Alice has already asked Julian not to employ him as a messenger. She is the target of Hugh's malign intentions; not the vehicle, as Desdemona is for Iago to assail Othello. Again, Hugh in his own way remains loyal to his master; if he is jealous of Julian, this only compounds his wounded pride in relation to Alice. He is sly but not so much in control of his feelings as to be called calculating. A poem by Coleridge first published at the time *Alice du Clós* was completed, *Not at Home*, is a commentary on how such feelings originate:

That Jealousy may rule a mind
Where Love could never be
I know; but ne'er expect to find
Love without Jealousy.

She has a strange cast in her ee,
A swart sour-visaged maid—
But yet Love's own twin-sister she
His house-mate and his shade.

(PWI 1118)

The play on names that serves Hugh's revenge — his loose use of the word "page" to substitute for what the narrator correctly calls "squire" — is a demotion of a kind Coleridge thought indicative of "resentment" and "suppressed passion, especially of hardly smothered dislike," "most common among the lower orders, & origin of Nick-names."⁶ Compare his own well-known puns on the names Leibniz and Spinoza or even, in "Punic Greek", on his own name. They are all indicative of some kind of trivialising or low esteem one way or another.

3.3. Lord Julian shares the flavour of his servant's baseness, albeit in a differently stifled way. He is in some way engaged to be married to Alice, yet he issues an untimely command he expects her to follow and he has a deep compulsion to meet her in clandestine surroundings ("the Covert Lane") as if he shrank from acknowledging his love. As the narrator comments:

It grieves me sore to think, to say,
That Names so seldom meet with Love,
Yet Love wants courage without a Name!

He can be roused to jealous action in a flash, like Othello, but otherwise his jealousy appears more like that of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. He is not by nature trusting; Alice obeys his instructions but with no hint of any bond but a legal one between them; there is nothing in him of the noble Moor. He is served as he deserves by his surly rough factotum. At the same time, Alice is no devoted Desdemona. She is compared at length to Venus, the morning star, that lingers on as if "To brave the' advancing Morn,"⁷ but she betrays no positive feelings towards the man she is pledged to marry (lines 28-34). Only "flight and fear" enter the comparison. As Graham Davidson succinctly put the matter: "she has the innocence of the Christabel who has met Geraldine, an innocence of act but not of consciousness." And as Peter Cheyne added, it is important that Coleridge refers to the star under which Alice's fateful day begins as "he", not "she" (in line 33); that is, in its guise as Lucifer, not as Venus (as in AV Isaiah 14:12).

3.4. Hugh and Julian define themselves in the narrative against Alice's innocence, but one might indeed wonder if what she represents is wholly unqualified. The narrator lovingly portrays her as childishly innocent while "loosely wrapt in Maiden White," but she immerses herself in "Dan Ovid's mazy tale" which is the reverse of innocent, making "loosely" become a suspect word.⁸ Again, Hugh's "taunting Vein... thrill'd like venom thro' her Brain" and Alice's tart retort is born of pride and anger. Perhaps she feels

⁶ CMTV 842. For Leibnitz, see *CL* II 747; for Spinoza, *BL* I 194; for his own name, *PWI* 972 etc.

⁷ Coleridge's use of the apostrophe is peculiar in this poem: see also line 3. In the present instance it was possibly inserted to suggest an extra pause, and thus lengthen the line in reading.

⁸ See the references to "mazy" and *The Garden of Boccaccio* in my *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) via the index.

compromised by a dim awareness of shame, born of her reading and uncertain relationship with Julian. The narrator repeatedly emphasises her childishness by such formulations as the “lovely child of old Du Clos!” and always thinks of her as younger than we might assume she is. Alice’s squire follows her as “a stripling” and is linked to her the more closely by his name, Florian, she being imaged as “the “earliest-open’d Flower.” A stanza is given over to describing him as proud to be gallant in her service, blushing when he holds her train, and so not entirely innocent even if lacking in experience; and by such hints we are shown that the young pair who re-enter the poem to make its conclusion are already touched with the first signs of maturity. They dress up and set out on sedate palfreys like children; they arrive at their catastrophe, out of control, on galloping fillies. The narrator links Alice with “the flowring May-thorn Tree” in a description that culminates in a vision of joy. She forgets that maythorn is also a promise of ill fortune, as she ignores other telling details she does not want to think about.⁹

3.5. The story in short is an accident waiting to happen, involving four characters who, the more fully they are considered, bring it on themselves. The unnamed fifth person — the narrator — is not involved in the action but she is no less present in a different way. Her interjections on Alice’s behalf, following on Hugh’s opening command, suggest she might be someone like an old family nurse. She supplies the long interruption that follows Hugh’s opening command and situates us within Alice’s point of view. Hers is the rising mood that accompanies Alice’s recovering spirits as she prepares to join the hunt: as much to play with her young-companion squire as to obey a future husband’s call. The same voice is heard as Alice moves off towards the hunt — “Alas! alas! and weladay!” — but it becomes more distant in the second half of the poem. The narrator shrinks back as the end comes in sight and we are left alone to move closer to the painful catastrophe. Of course, the nurse-as-narrator is a persona chosen by the author, and he is present too, manipulating rhymes and ironies and references outside her restricted purview. Who else to note that Alice has become like Diana, goddess of hunting, even though she is on the brink of being hunted to death in turn: an irony remarked by her “need” of Diana’s diadem that was crowned by a crescent moon (lines 184-85).¹⁰

4. *Enlarging stanzas and their rhymes*

4.1. The story is finely balanced and, if the ending is cruel, on whom does responsibility fall? The twinned villains obviously, but one has to allow the twinned victims could not say that guilt was a thing utterly impossible to them.

⁹ Compare the maythorn blossoms beneath boughs of dark green yew in the lines *Composed While Climbing the Left Ascent of Brockley Coomb* (PW I 203-04) and also those that preside over the opening lines of Wordsworth’s beginning-contribution to *The Three Graves* (*Early Poems and Fragments*, 1785-1797 ed. Carol Landon and Jared Curtis –Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997-- 860).

¹⁰ Alice’s mimicry of the language of hunting in lines 74-75 prefigures the identification; indeed, the age-old association between hunting and courting underlies the whole poem. A critical attitude towards hunting *per se* underlines poems otherwise as different as the *Ancient Mariner* and *The Story of the Mad Ox*.

Or does one suppose the fatal conjunction of all four together is the author's contrivance, and therefore his ultimate responsibility? Before addressing these questions, I must say more about the means Coleridge employed. The sudden shifts in point of view and focus I have described are part of his management.

4.2. Although the movement and structure of *Alice du Clós* conforms to the ballad tradition, its smaller elements do not. For a start, very few stanzas conform to the norm of alternating 4- and 3- stress lines rhyming abcb. The majority enlarge the pattern in ways that are not by themselves unusual, adding an additional rhyme here or extending a line there to drive home a point; but others again employ just two rhymes in stanzas of varying lengths in different combinations. Indeed, the two longest stanzas stretch to ten lines that some might prefer to call verse paragraphs, one of them employing three rhymes (lines 15-24) and the other five plus one line standing alone (lines 25-34), each in different ways. The odd line in the latter paragraph is part of an integrated ballad stanza that thereby prepares the way for a return to the four-line norm (in lines 35-38).

4.3. The ballad norm was established in Sir Hugh's opening instructions to Alice and immediately shifted into a more diffuse register when the narrator-nurse supplied her commentary in ten-line rhymed paragraphs. What is happening is that variations on the ballad stanza familiar from the *Ancient Mariner* are extended and combined with the rhyming schemes of *Christabel*, and yet the ballad norm remains the context within which the variations are worked. Thus, after a stanza including two rhymes, the norm is picked up again when Alice begins her reply (lines 44-47) and, following another two-rhyme stanza, Hugh's departure continues in regular ballad stanzas that happen (uniquely in this poem: lines 52-59) to form a single grammatical unit. Moving on, when Alice is left alone and calls for Florian, we find a run of enlarged stanzas containing just two rhymes and also a larger than usual number of couplets in different positions. The patterning sets up protocols that govern the way we see and respond to characters in action.

4.4. We encounter nothing in the second half of the narrative like the nurse's extended meditative description of Alice. The waiting Lord Julian is introduced and described in a series of stanzas that mostly depart from the ballad norm; but significantly not all and none in quite the same way, and they thereby embody his conflicted and constricted state of mind. Sir Hugh then re-enters, unaccompanied by Alice, and delivers his initial, falsely considerate report on how he found Alice in her bower. His three wholly invariant ballad stanzas (lines 141-52) form the longest consecutive sequence in the poem, which is an irony given their blatant hypocrisy. As the climax builds, couplets re-enter all of the remaining stanzas and are used here to different effect than in the earlier scene with Alice and Florian. While they again serve to extend and delay the narrative movement, this has by now gathered momentum to an extent

that they open onto a pool of impending disaster. The manner in which rhyme is used to advance and retard our view of the action is a master class in manipulation.

4.5. The underlying continuo is provided by the structure of the basic ballad stanza: the pulsing forward rhythm of the first three lines is checked by the rhyme that ties the fourth line back to the second; and the rhythm is modified at every stage by anything between six and twelve syllables in any line and other factors. For example, the caesura, that usually finds a central place in 4-stress lines, necessarily leans one way or the other when the number of stresses is uneven. The concluding stanza (lines 187-93) is, as it should be, a definitive example: the a-rhyme is doubled, the c-rhyme is tripled (the only triplet in the whole poem), and each group of multiplied lines shifts the emphasis one way and the other to release their force onto the isolated b-rhymes that follow and tie the two sentences they conclude in a choking knot. At the same time, in this same stanza, sounds cross and intersect, keep echoes alive while others are renewed. The method for the most part works unconsciously. When it is noticed lending emphasis to different words and phrases, it can be relished.

4.6. A suitably different example is provided by the two crucially important paragraphs spoken by the nurse. The second paragraph, like the first, opens with a couplet but it contains a further couplet (lines 28-29) that repeats the initial rhymes of the previous, first paragraph (lines 15-17); and the syntax of this second paragraph runs across the line-endings in a completely different, more fluent way. Again, as one becomes familiar with the poem, one realises other details contribute to the complex interrelation. Words that contribute to the nurse's earlier, more optimistic point of view are overtaken by meanings that come from some more neutral space. For example Florian's "joy and pride" (82) becomes Julian's "shame and pride" (104); as I said before, Alice and Florian's horses, as they carry their riders to their unwitting destruction, change from staid palfreys (75) to "mad" fillies (180). Innocent words assume prescient meanings in retrospect, and the caring nurse's "advancing Morn" (line 34) ends in mourning sadness. Similarly, the words "buskins" and "quiver" that echo through the earlier part of the poem: the buskins of comedy are left behind and the airy, shimmering latticed light of Alice is overcast and violently stilled. And again the possibility remains, in the larger perspective and like a stain, that Alice (again like Desdemona) might somehow have collaborated in, even abetted her own destruction.

5. *A scheme of echoes*

5.1. These last examples show the author's hand, there is no gainsaying; and this is revealed to any who have read further in Coleridge in ways that leave no doubt where he stands. The title of this next stage of my argument is borrowed

from an Irish poet, Trevor Joyce.¹¹ I use it here to describe not just the way Coleridge's poem sets up an interlocking scheme of sounds and values but contains clear traces of concerns touched on before at less or greater length in other poems. Thus, line 24, "A Snow-drop in a tuft of Snow!" repeats with slight variation the concluding line of Coleridge's *The Apotheosis; or, The Snow-drop*, a poem in answer to Mary Robinson's ode on the same theme (see *PW* I 424-426). It thereby links Alice with a figure with whom Coleridge strongly identified as an abandoned victim of cruel love affairs. Again, original readers of *Alice du Clós* would have read, in line 91, the name Ellen and not Alice (see *PW* I 1102n, II 1306); that is, they would have been reminded of the sisterly friend of the protagonist of Coleridge's continuation of Wordsworth's *The Three Graves*, available for more than twenty years under his name as well as in the collection in which the poem *Alice* appeared. The context in *Alice* is very close to a passage in *The Three Graves* where "a perfect glory" is described (*PW* I 348) as prelude to a disastrous turn in the narrative.¹² In short, the verbal slip betrays the promise of tragedy that for some reason must necessarily follow.

5.2. Connections of the same kind continue to be made through the poem. The narrator's sad reflection over Lord Julian's mixed feelings as he waits for Sir Hugh to return with Alice (lines 111-12) repeat lines Coleridge wrote in a notebook in December 1801 (*CN* I 1066). In the context of the ballad, the narrator's statement that "Love wants courage without a Name" is gnomic and oddly out of character. But in the context of Coleridge's further development of the idea, in his published adaptation of Lessing's *Die Namen* (see *PW* I 588-89), the statement is a clarification of Julian's blocked impulses: his secrecy and shame and pride are aspects of a predicament that consumes him in jealous rage. As Graham Davidson comments: "Julian and Alice do not use personal names for each other," he "is still 'My Lord' to her, and she 'the daughter of old du Clós' to him," and it is questionable whether they have "reached any real intimacy despite being formally betrothed."

5.3. Another connection of the same kind is established between lines 175-78 and a poem Coleridge wrote into Sara Hutchinson's album, subsequently published in *Sibylline Leaves* and afterwards entitled *Time, Real and Imaginary* (*PW* I 798-800). The situation in *Alice du Clós* reverses this other one in which a sister runs ahead of a blind brother, calling to him with "reverted face", the word *reverted* picking up with situations in Coleridge's poems as early as in *Absence: A Poem* (*PW* I 99-103, line 80). In short, a reader of Coleridge's other poems is positioned to recognise his lifelong preoccupations working themselves out. They strengthen the impression that the vulnerable Alice is

¹¹ "Construction" in *Sole Glum Trek* (Dublin: New Writers' Press, 1967) 20. The phrase is used in exemplary fashion in an essay by Eric Falci "Joinery: Trevor Joyce's Lattice Poems" in *Essays on the Poetry of Trevor Joyce* ed. Niamh O'Mahony (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2014) 128-54

¹² A similarity noted by John Beer in his *Coleridge's Play of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 207.

also, in some way, responsible for the situation she finds herself in; that her fear and Julian's rage are somehow interrelated, caused by some sort of blindness or inability to engage a central life-choice in a mature way. A biographer might even want to trace this back to Coleridge's inability to make such a choice in respect to Mary Evans: "a Passion which [he] felt neither the power or the courage to subdue" (*CL* I 130) and admittedly lacked the "fortitude" to confront and engage with directly (*CL* I 87-88).

5.4. The sense of the connectedness of this poem, which otherwise appears designed to make a firm, separate statement, grows with every reading. One of the few commentators to discuss the poem at any length suggests the star on the brow of the "moon-shiny Doe" imaged in lines 18-19 portends disaster, as in the *Ancient Mariner*, which is plausible.¹³ One might (I think more plausibly) suggest that such an emblematic doe brings into the poem Wordsworth's *White Doe of Rylstone* (1807), a poem long in the making and intimately connected with Coleridge's *Christabel*. The character Christabel is directly recalled by the innocent but ambivalently culpable Alice, and in situations such as when Sir Hugh's words "thrill'd like venom thro' her Brain" (line 40). Indeed, single words in the poem like "glee" (line 68), "mazy" (line 37) and "giddy" (line 174) tremble with added significance when one remembers their prominent positions in poems like (respectively) *The Three Graves* and *The Solitary Date-tree*, *Religious Musings* and *Kubla Khan, Oh! Mihi Præteritos* (sometimes known as *Quæ Nocent Docent*), and *The Garden of Boccaccio*. They are an active presence, gathering and radiating a force beyond the use to which they are presently applied.

5.5. One last, minor connection will confirm the point and bring it to bear on the group of poems Coleridge had particularly in mind. The choice of Alice's surname, "du Clós", suggests a closeted existence, separate from the larger world like Coleridge's lime-tree bower perhaps, which is appropriate—just as the repeated conjunction of "du Clós" with "old" underlines her protected youthfulness. But the diacritical mark on Clós is another matter because it is in every respect superfluous: it makes no sense above the letter "o" in French usage. Coleridge took over such diacritics to mark the varying of accent from Percy's *Reliques*:

And there came lords, and there came knights,
Fro manye a farre countryè,
To break a spere for theyr ladyes love

¹³ J. T. Barbarese "Dramas of Naming in Coleridge" *Studies in English Literature* XXXVII (1997) 673-98 at 688. The golden Morning Star of lines 29-34, as Coleridge presents it, is of course already not what it first seems.

One might add to Barbarese's conjectures on naming that Julian shares the name of the Neoplatonic philosopher, emperor-apostate, in whose ideas and edicts Coleridge took a passing interest; and that Alice is a shortened form of Adelaide, who sings the song *Domestic Peace* (*PW* I 114-15) in *The Death of Robespierre* (*PW* III 22). Peter Cheyne adds the further suggestion that the name Julian recalls the Julian Laws (*lex Iulia*) of the Emperor Augustus that encouraged the Roman higher classes to breed more, punished adultery and allowed men to kill straying wives.

Before that faire ladyè.¹⁴

I suggest he turned the diacritic the other way (to French acute instead of grave) not only to add to the irony that terminating clósure will overtake protected shelter but also to make visually strange and thereby connect his poem with others written thirty years earlier, where diacritics signalled affairs that were out of joint. It connects with the word “eye” spelled “ee” both in the *Ancient Mariner* and here (in line 89) with respect to Florian; and also with the wrenched mispronunciation, in *Christabel*, of the name Geraldine so as to rhyme with Leoline (here “ee” becoming “eyne,” reversing the direction of change in the *Mariner*).¹⁵ I suggest that the earlier *Ballad of the Dark Ladiè* is at the centre of this destabilisation and stakes out the problem that *Alice du Clós* confronts.

6. Postponed problems

6.1. *The Ballad of the Dark Ladiè* began as a companion piece to *Christabel*, and Coleridge returned to work on it in late 1799 when he wrote the poem *Love*, the earliest version of which was published as the “Introduction” or “Preface” to the earlier ballad. Only the introductory stanzas of the ballad were committed to paper and published, and they describe two aspects of a single scene: an unnamed lady waiting anxiously for the arrival of a knight named Lord Falkland, to whom she appears to be betrothed; this followed by her distress at his obvious reluctance to celebrate their love in a public marriage. The knight is indecisive like Julian, but there are two important differences: his fiancée is passionately in love with him, has “given him all” and has thereby lost the respect of her friends; and he appears less confused than manipulative, ready with romantic promises that do not ring true.

6.2. The poem *Love*, in its first short version introducing the ballad, promises a “woeful Tale of Love” concerning

the cruel scorn
That craz’d this bold and lonely Knight,
And how he roam’d the mountain woods,
Nor rested day or night. (PWI 606)

In the second free-standing version, published soon afterwards in *Lyrical Ballads* 1800, the description of the now unnamed knight’s state of mind is expanded. He is a victim of a proud lady’s disinclination to recognise his suit,

¹⁴ *Sir Cauline* Part II, lines 53–56 in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* [ed. Thomas Percy] (3 vols. London: F. and C. Rivington 4th ed., 1794) I 53. See Percy’s comment on this practice in his introductory Essay in *ed. cit.*, I liii. It might be noted that *Sir Cauline*, which influenced Coleridge in particular in his enlargement of the ballad stanza, was largely rewritten by Percy.

¹⁵ I discuss this matter at greater length in an unpublished essay, *Contemplation in Coleridge’s Poetry* Section 3, fn 18.

which he fruitlessly pursues for “ten long years.” In his distracted state, he has a vision of “An angel beautiful and bright: | And . . . knew it was a Fiend,” which one must suppose is based on her rejection; but this is followed by his rescuing her from the midst of a “murderous band” who threaten her with an “outrage worse than death” (PW I 608). At this point, the “Lady of the Land” acknowledges his love, and tends and nurses him in an effort “to expiate | The scorn that crazed his brain”. His “madness” goes away, and he dies having finally expressed feelings that have been reciprocated. Although the first short version of the poem, when it was an introduction to the ballad, promised a tale of “Of Man’s perfid’ous cruelty” and a “cruel wrong” that “Befel the Dark Ladie”, the lengthened version describes a disdainful Lady redeemed. Her suitor is as much her victim as her aggressor; and the burden of the story is reconciliation, not exploitation.

6.3. *The Ballad of the Dark Ladie* and *Love* present both sides of the same coin. They share the same four-line ballad stanza, regularly rhyming abcb, the first three lines comprising eight syllables with six in the fourth line and only a few variations of syllabic count. We see Falkland in the *Ballad* through the eyes of his Lady as if his action was at best incomprehensible, at worst calculated abuse of her trust. Coleridge left no doubt in a manuscript note — he is indeed “a solemn Scoundrel” (PW I 524n) — and the woman clearly suffers. The position is reversed in the poem *Love*: it is the unnamed knight who suffers because the woman he loves does not acknowledge him until it is too late; and, if she too suffers, she has brought it on herself by her unthinking, perhaps too-conventional behaviour.

6.4. Crucial to the difference — and present in both the preliminary and full versions of the poem *Love* — is Coleridge’s decision to frame the story he is telling; that is, to incorporate it into a larger frame in which a lover tells it to his loved one. Here, the auditor, Genevieve, is hesitant rather than scornful and the narrator’s purpose is simple persuasion. He turns around the beginning situation of the *Dark Ladie* so as to represent the hero’s state of mind as pathetic, set awry by nightmare and waiting to be saved by the heroine. He tells the story in such a way that neither he nor Genevieve have to declare their feelings openly: the manner of his telling draws them closer until they find themselves enacting the same resolution almost unselfconsciously. The element of awareness or even sly deceit is admitted — “‘Twas partly Love, and partly Fear | And partly ‘twas a bashful art’ — but such means are held to justify the reconciliation of “All impulses of soul and sense”:

And hopes, and fears that kindle hope,
An undistinguishable throng,
And gentle wishes long subdued,
Subdued and cherish’d long!

(PW I 609)

6.5. What these two poems inherit from *Christabel* and earlier poems is clear. The plight of the Dark Ladiè/Lady of the Land is a shadowy mix of *Christabel* and *Geraldine*, and there are verbal echoes of *The Three Graves*. The two poems together might be understood as an attempt to address problems explored in *Christabel* and left hanging. In particular, the supernatural dimension that *Christabel* shared with the *Ancient Mariner* is dropped and the focus narrows to the human emotions involved: the relation between fear and rage, the need to understand (articulate, name) contradictory and deep-buried emotions, the irony (indeed tragedy) of the fate of innocence. Each poem fixes on a moment of dawning realisation, *Love* attempting to work through its application to a world outside of a chivalric story; that is, by means of resources that work more closely with and by means of emotions (sound, pacing, shifts of point of view) so that a sense of change brings about actual change. The issues involved go back to Coleridge's very early days: the name Genevieve, for instance, carries forward from the sonnet he addressed at school to his nurse's daughter (PWI 25). The Chinese-box structure of *Love* matches the theme of the self discovering itself in its own reflection that is endemic in his poems throughout the 1790s and almost parodied in his adaptation of an early Wordsworth poem in *Lewti* (PWI 457-61):

Nay, treacherous image! leave my mind—
And yet, thou did'st not look unkind.¹⁶

6.6. This said, one must nevertheless reckon that *Love* just kicked many troubling issues down the road. It was a literary solution, certainly, but the real-life situation contained aspects that needed to be revisited and tested over again. To take just one example, *The Night-scene*, the only published fragment of an unfinished play, *The Triumph of Loyalty* (PWI 653-56 and see III 955-91) centres on the lasting impulse of two noble minds to deceive themselves, to give over totally to narcissistic feeling, the woman leading the man. It contains a striking reminiscence of the pantheistic moments in *The Eolian Harp*, when "many idle flitting phantasies, | Traverse my indolent and passive brain" (PWI 233), which points up the problem: the self finding itself in an other who is only a mirrored, solipsistic self-projection or delusion.

6.7. *Alice du Clós* was a fresh start on such topics. It begins *in medias res*, like the *Dark Ladiè*. The baser instincts of Lord Julian, externalised in Sir Hugh, bring about destruction; but the doubling leaves space to hint at Julian's genuine confusion of mind. Subsequently, in the poem *Love*, the hint of Genevieve's complicity is sophisticated by devolving active responsibility onto the teller of the tale. Twenty and more years later, the heroine Alice is tacitly and ambiguously complicit, although possessed of more child-like innocence, and the action is unmediated. Subtle extensions of the ballad stanza, every

¹⁶ The several wide-ranging issues in the preceding paragraph are discussed with reference to particular poems in *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* and further references therein.

means of poetic manipulation, are brought to bear on the issues involved. Ted Hughes remarked that the *Dark Lady* has “an amputated kind of completeness.”¹⁷ The surgical skill employed on *Alice du Clós* is considerably more focused: the amputation is better prepared for and gives the impression of a body conceived to be born thus. Like *Love* it makes a completed thing of the experience it describes. Unlike *Love*, it contains no trace of indulgence or hypocrisy.

7. A “live” solution

7.1. The first extant fragments incorporated into *Alice du Clós* date from December 1801 and the years following; the drive to fashion and complete the poem began perhaps in 1824, and intensified in 1828-29 (*PW* I 1098-99; II 1302-12). Coleridge might well have been encouraged to finish a poem that had long lived vaguely in his mind by thoughts of publication in one of the poetical albums that grew to be fashionable during the 1820s; indeed, he even came to an arrangement with Frederick Reynolds to publish it in *The Keepsake for 1829*. The albums and the culture surrounding them particularly involved women as authors and readers, and this has an obvious bearing on his poetry of the 1820s. However, the present poem is a timely reminder that his identification with female protagonists has deep personal roots and connects with an earlier, more radical phase of women’s emancipation. *Alice du Clós* cannot be parcelled up with writers like Letitia Langdon and trends like Silver Fork fiction. As the allusions to Mary Robinson and masculine “pride” make clear, it exists within an older movement inaugurated by Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft, writers in whom he had a much more serious interest.

7.2. While the poem must be read in terms of its deeper origins, it remains important that the later opportunity for publication was relinquished in 1828-29; and at this point *Christabel* re-enters the argument, a poem which had been published in a professedly unfinished state in 1816 and which continued to haunt its author afterwards, as the continuations of the narrative reported by James Gillman and Derwent Coleridge show (see *PW* I 478-79). I strongly suspect Coleridge thought he was finished with what he could write when Part One was complete and he began *The Ballad of the Dark Lady*; and that Part Two was added as a result of Wordsworth’s urging, to fill out the new edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800. The latter might even be a conscious demonstration that a narrative continuation in the same style — “witchery by daylight” — is not possible.¹⁸ *Alice du Clós* probably began in the 1820s from the premise of a story that was truncated but complete. What indeed could happen next in narrative terms? Would Julian kill Hugh, and then be killed by a knight who rescues Alice? Or would Alice marry a somehow reformed Julian? Such suggestions are just as absurd as any of the attempted continuations of

¹⁷ *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) 446-47.

¹⁸ See *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* 105-06 and endnotes.

Christabel: for instance, Martin Tupper's *Geraldine* (1838). Alice's complicity in her own destruction is more explicable than Christabel's, and we are shown by subtle hints how she creates her own fate: she is, in her surprising way, Julian's fitting counterpart. The narrative surely rested on this premise from the moment Coleridge began to address the task of composition seriously.

7.3. The poem communicates a sense of what Allen Grossman, in another context, happily terms "elate completeness."¹⁹ Thirty years of trial and hard speculation over a wide variety of topics were resolved. It is worth recalling that Coleridge's experience in writing for the theatre played a crucial part: plays like *Diadestè* (note the diacritic) and *Zapolya* carry traces of his thinking and assisted his sense of pacing and capacity to objectify. Meanwhile, sudden reversals in Coleridge's poetry were not new. The "mild reproof" that closes off the pantheistic speculations in *The Eolian Harp* (PWI 234) is one striking example.²⁰ The Ancient Mariner's narrative progresses by sudden shifts and reversals of mood; and, as Julian's lance strikes Alice, we experience again the same wanton destruction of goodness:

‘Why look’st thou so?’—with my cross bow
I shot the Albatross.” (PWI 378)

The difference of course is that *Alice du Clós* bundles beginning, middle and end into a compressed finale: a sequence into what is made to seem a moment. As always, this kind of writing, directed to such ends as moved Coleridge as he wrote, is more than a technical exercise. It involves a moral decision and is a realistic statement that “romantic” love cannot survive in a “real” world. Such love pursues its object blindly: the echo of *Time, Real and Imaginary* is crucial. The destructive pun is not cynical: it should be read against a poem like *Youth and Age*, where gains and losses are finely balanced. Again, to get its measure, it should be read against the work of young contemporaries like John Hamilton Reynolds and Thomas Hood where, fitted snugly within end-rhymes, the effect is trivialised:

Ben Battle was a soldier bold,
And used to war’s alarms;
But a cannon-ball took off his legs
So he laid down his arms!²¹

7.4. The shock Coleridge’s pun delivers is a world away from this and all the

¹⁹ In discussing Yeats's poem, *The Cap and Bells*, in *Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats: A Study of 'The Wind among the Reeds'* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1969) 188.

²⁰ A comment by Charles J. Rzepka *The Self as Mind: Vision and Identity in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 116 bears on the present context: “Sara's darting eye is particularly devastating because it destroys [the] mood of gentle, dreamy persuasion.”

²¹ Hood *Faithless Nelly Gray: A Pathetic Ballad in Whims and Oddities, in Prose and Verse* (London: Lupton Relfe, 1826) 139–42 at 139.

more deeply disturbing. If it momentarily flattens the poem to the level of a string of words, the associations built by the use of overlapping sounds remain unaffected. The enigma of the poem rests on and continues to live within the duplicated word “wanton”, with everything the word suggests for Coleridge. He uses it in the common sense of sexually abandoned and inviting in the “wanton glee” of *To an Unfortunate Woman* (line 6: *PW* I 324), in the “wanton dances” of *The Wills of the Wisp* (line 2: *PW* I 670), and in “Love’s accomplice” who “played the wanton” by half-disclosing her bosom in *The Picture* (see lines 59-67: *PW* I 714). But the additional dimension of teasing in the last instance here — of invitation withheld — shadows the “half-wanton, half-afraid” “wild Melody” of the “zephyr-travelld Harp” in the earliest manuscript version of *The Destiny of Nations* (lines 14.1.1-4: *PW* II 387), with which one might compare the “coy maid half yielding to her lover” of *The Eolian Harp* (line 15: *PW* I 232). These last two passages leave no doubt that the preoccupations that ignite Coleridge’s pun are feelings and ideas that play across his entire life and writing: creative opposites that involve more than a rhetorical figure.

7.5. The final stanza appears for the first time in *Poetical Works* 1834, which raises a question: was the ending always intended or was it just impatiently slapped on for publication? The answer is both yes and no, and neither simply. The progress of the plot up to this point is an inevitable movement towards catastrophe. The shocking abruptness of the closing lines sends a judder backwards through the whole poem, but such an end connects with the violent beginning, tremors from which made themselves felt at crucial moments in the intervening lines. Wordsworth achieved the same troubling completeness when he deleted the last stanza of *Some Fits of Passion*, so as to end:

“O mercy!” to myself I cried,
 “If Lucy should be dead!”²²

Indeed, it is likely that Coleridge shrank from adding the bombshell ending to the holograph version he sent Reynolds because, at the moment he came to copy it into place, he realised his poem was unsuited to a Christmas gift-volume. He instead held it over and placed it first among the enlarged and newly titled group of “Miscellaneous Poems” in his last *Poetical Works*, where it occupies a prominent position following the *Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*.

8. Clarifying comparisons

8.1. Mention of two further Coleridge poems written about the same time as *Alice du Clós* will help clarify his achievement. First, *The Improvisatore* (*PW* I 1055-62, II 1248-59): this was begun in summer 1826 and published the

²² He also rewrote in compressed form the stanzas that originally stood at the beginning: see ‘*Lyrical Ballads*’, and *Other Poems*, 1797-1800 ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992) 162 and compare 294.

following year in Samuel Hall's album, *The Amulet for 1828*, so it is part of the literary culture of the time that lies behind the initial plans for *Alice*. Indeed, *The Improvisatore* may be said to be more aware of its potential readership and less extensive in its personal retrospection. It picks up with Coleridge's contemporaneous thinking about the situation of women: for instance, "The Man's desire is for the Woman, the Woman's desire is for the desire of the Man" (*TT—CC—I* 91). It relates not only to Coleridge's identification with Alice but also to her implicit need to discover a real (not phantom) other. It relates to the lesson that Age teaches Youth, that the pursuit of Love by Hope might come in time to rest on different ground, that of Affection-Love:

Yes, Lady! deem him not unblest:
The certainty that struck HOPE dead,
Hath left CONTENTMENT in her stead:
And that is next to Best! (*PWI* 1062)

The Improvisatore celebrates the resolution of a long-standing question with the recognition that it no longer applies, leaving its author the more secure. The resolution is congruent with the position mapped in *Alice du Clós*, which shines a light on issues that once brought his writing to a standstill with unexpected clarity, even if *Alice* required a different reading-context.

8.2. The second comparison involves *The Garden of Boccaccio* (*PWI* 1089-95, II 1290-98). This was composed at the time Coleridge was considering the implications of what he had written in *Alice du Clós*; indeed, it substituted for *Alice* in Reynolds's *Keepsake* while he continued to ponder where *Alice* itself had taken him. The two poems share so much: from the basic situation of Coleridge musing on Stothard's illustration of Boccaccio that matches Alice reading Ovid down to shared phrases and significant words. The boar-hunting scene that Coleridge injects into Stothard interweaves with Lord Julian's hunt; again, *Boccaccio* incorporates the *Alice* situation as a story within a story in the manner of the poem *Love*, the author's self in a Highgate garden replacing the unnamed narrator on the slopes of the Quantocks²³; and with Anne Gillman actively handing him the illustration in place of the passive Genevieve, and thereby prompting his daydream. There is more than enough in *The Garden of Boccaccio* for us to muddle the person who dreams with the real-life Coleridge who is the subject of biographers, and it certainly helps to understand his relationship with the Friend whose "quiet hand" placed the illustration before him as one of "Affection-Love".

8.3. *Boccaccio* is not, however, a directly confessional poem, to be assimilated to the so-called Conversation Poems as they are conventionally understood. It is not written in experimental blank verse, but in paragraphs of regular

²³ See *PWI* 604 for the manner in which *Love* conflates memories of Cothelstone Park in Somerset with a scene involving Sara Hutchinson at Sockburn in County Durham.

pentameters that develop from an opening string of rhyming couplets into elaborate patterns in which differently positioned couplets form a part. By such regulated means, the subject of Coleridge's ballad poems is translated back into a medium that has obvious — one might reckon misleadingly obvious — associations with poems like (say) *The Nightingale*, but there is a reason. *Boccaccio* shows Coleridge playing with materials and poetic means that once interested him, in order to play (with great skill) on slacker strings. The replay with modified means is fascinating, and the result served to meet a pressing commitment, but it is important that he appears to have lost interest in the poem even before it was gathered into *Collected Poems* 1829, where it was the last of a group under the sub-heading "Prose in Rhyme" (see *PWI* I 1091, 1272). One could argue that the delayed publication of *Alice* is proof he took the latter poem more seriously than *Boccaccio*. The framing alibi is abandoned; the solutions that dreams bring are clearly not to be confused with reality; the *prima facie* objections to Affection-Love raised by some modern readers — is a degree of self-deception involved? — do not apply. The substitution of *Boccaccio* for *Alice* in *The Keepsake* suggests Coleridge exactly comprehended what he was about.

8.4. Coleridge reached conclusions in his prose-writing that he turned over in his verse to the end of his life.²⁴ He also wrote poems for comfort — or (better) consolation — "That woke the Tear yet stole away the Pang" (*PWI* 1093), and others simply for fun. One can only conclude that *Alice du Clós* is a definitive statement of considered intent.

9. Beyond the text

9.1. How does such an approach mesh with other, more current concerns? "Close reading" has come to have a bad name in some quarters as a limited and limiting exercise, but it is as it is and therein has its own integrity. It is a means of examining the anatomy of a poem, taking into account the nature of the beast, i.e. as a poem as opposed to any other form of writing. I chose to write about *Alice* because it is often passed over, or those who linger over it seem to miss the point. In particular, it may have been ignored because it does not fit a preconceived view of what its author is good for. Reading it with care is an opportunity to make a fresh start, perhaps more likely to succeed than starting with a poem already settled in place by fixed opinions.

9.2. A reading, in this sense, will take into account the poet's personality, character, circumstance, the conventions and contexts of his time, and his other writings: for instance, notebooks and letters. Conversely, a reader's

²⁴ Ewan James Jones has written a valuable book based on exactly the opposite premise that I like to think does not contradict what I have tried to say here. See his *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) — which includes a chapter on punning with respect to *Limbo* (pp.107-45) — and also his interview-response to "Five Questions" at <www.bars.ac.uk/blog/?p=384> 11 Aug 2014, accessed 10 Jan 2015.

primary interest might be in the poet himself and such a reader would be looking to the poem to reveal more about these matters. This is a valid quest, but it will only succeed if it is recognised that poems like *Alice du Clós* are primarily literary constructions and any other use of them must take that defining feature into account. One cannot pass it by, or catch up with it afterwards as an optional consideration, even if a different reason for reading remains the primary one. Any reading has to come through the text with an understanding of why it was projected as a poem for the words to stand as a reliable witness.

9.3. In the same way, cultural and political meanings can of course be elicited and I have touched on a couple: the historical filiations of Coleridge's instinct to identify with a woman's point of view and the dimension of cruel dispatch in rhyming puns following the long war with France. I should also mention another because it is of large, if not all-encompassing, importance. The narrative of *Alice du Clós* reflects a life-long hesitancy on Coleridge's part to commit to another self in whom he saw his own self reflected, hesitancy so extreme that left him in limbo, a condition of life-in-death:

Such griefs with such men well agree,
But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?
To be beloved is all I need,
And whom I love, I love indeed. (PWI 754-55)

Why should grief fall on him, the innocent, or is he not so innocent? And such hesitancy turns the question into one of cause: is it due to fear or pride? The dilemma — which Coleridge pursued at many levels and ultimately as a question of will — underlay his difficulty as a writer in relating to a reading-public, the larger part of which he felt was unsympathetic. Although his feelings were unduly stretched, the predicament is representative; indeed one can see it as the central problem of government in a mass society. The resolution requires an amount of trust on both sides and Coleridge's own most elaborate attempt to bridge the gap — *Aids to Reflection* — could only remove objections and then appeal for a leap of faith. The gap since his time has grown wider.

9.4. I will bring this point to bear more closely and be done. The speed, intricacy and particular compression of *Alice* are part of the power it exerts. It wraps itself round us until it implodes on the pun. The method is hypnotic — it establishes control, places us in an enchanted place — and can be connected with facets of its author's personality.²⁵ It is certainly connected with his dominant habits as a conversationalist and speaker of verse — “Weave a circle round him thrice” (PWI 514) — alongside the insecurity that wanted courage

²⁵ As it has been, for example, by Rzepka *The Self as Mind*—Chapters 1 and 3 in particular, along with their extensive endnotes.

to speak its name. From here is a small step to his uncertain relation to a readership that evolved in a dramatic way during his lifetime. The same challenge has faced every reformer, and the conditions are speeded up and magnified today. The poem in question is a small gesture, perhaps, but to write such a thing is to take the measure of the world and to pass judgement on the condition of living. The way Coleridge does this is brave, elegant and sound. *Alice du Clós* happens to amount to something like a conclusive statement, in personal terms, but other poems exhibit the same qualities of mind and that is why they clamour to be read. Questions of whether he is a major poet, a failed thinker or a renegade politico are for the birds.