Chapter 9
“A Kite’s Dinner”

Coleridge’s passions flair and subside, are encouraged and crushed, soothed by drugs and brandy, or roused by them. The man of politics, theology, and poetry ebbs and flows with the acceptance or rejection of a stocky good-humored woman. Her “heart-wringing” letter of Feb. 21, 1804 sends him to Malta two months later to recover from wounds of body and spirit. He wrestles away from the embraces of the violently adoring diva, Cecilia Bertolossi, as we saw in the chapter on singing, because Asra’s spirit intrudes at the end of the bed. Returning reluctantly and most slowly to England in 1806, bloated and drugged, “determined to separate from his wife” with her “endless heart-wasting,” he is ripe for suffering. Wrung or wasted, his heart yearns for love; he is thirty-four years old and alone.

Like his first teacher on the ways of women, Mary Wollstonecraft, he knows with the understanding that no one can love just one person (CL 2, 887) and that it is not realistic to expect exclusive possession for life. As Wollstonecraft’s friend William Blake shows, using the butterfly image that Coleridge also favors for love as it flies—

He who bends to himself a Joy

Does the winged life destroy;

But he who kisses the Joy as it flies

Lives in Eternity’s sunrise—

each lover must leave the loved one free to fly. But as Mary Wollstonecraft tried to kill herself twice when twice she found Gilbert Imlay in the arms of actresses (at least they were different actresses), Coleridge too is eaten up by jealousy when it is his turn to play second fiddle.

The torments of Coleridge’s desire increase between October and December 1806, and rage throughout the following year. Richard Holmes tells the kind of erotic story that Dr. James Gillman steered completely away from to protect his friend from detractors who conflated his
opium addiction with sensuality. Holmes has found that after the reunion with the Wordsworths at an inn at Kendal, William stayed behind to talk to Coleridge on the night of Oct. 29, 1806, and so did Sara Hutchinson, “unchaperoned,” “with some risk of scandal” (Holmes, p. 75). Holmes writes that on this momentous night Coleridge felt from looks and touches that his love was reciprocated, and excitedly recorded in his notebook, “I know, you love me!—My reason knows it, my heart feels it; yet still let your eyes, your hands tell me; still say, O often & often say, ‘My Beloved! I love you’; indeed I love you: for why should not my ears, and all my outward Being share in the Joy—the fuller my inward Being is of the sense, the more my outward organs yearn & crave for it. O bring my whole nature into balance and harmony” (CN 2938). (One marvels here, once again, at how Desmond McCarthy, quoted approvingly by J. C. C. Mays, could decisively assert that “Coleridge was never passionate.”) Holmes speculates about the mysteries in this meeting. Was Wordsworth, friend and confidant, also a “go-between with Asra”? “Was Wordsworth prepared for Sara to become Coleridge’s mistress under his own roof at Coleorton? Or did he believe that Sara herself really wished this? It is very hard to tell” (Holmes, p. 76). Holmes shines a dazzling light on the possibilities in these obscure consultations.

Seemingly encouraged by this reciprocated love, Coleridge goes boldly to break the news to his wife that he will separate from her. For almost two months he endures her rages and the heart-wrenching joys of his children at seeing him, and then returns with Hartley to the community of Wordsworths and Hutchisons living together in Lord and Lady Beaumont’s borrowed farm at Coleorton. In less than a week the bottom falls out of his expectations.

On a Saturday morning after Christmas 1806 Coleridge, drunk and desperate, in huge letters writes: “THE EPOCH. Saturday, 27 December, 1806—Queen’s Head, Stringston, 1/2 a mile from Coleorton Church, 50 minutes after 10/” (CN 2975). Three times again he returns in anguish to write about this moment. In Sept. 1807 “O agony! O the vision of that Saturday morning—of the Bed—O cruel! Is he not beloved, adored by two—and two such Beings.—And must I not be beloved near him except as a Satellite?—But O mercy, mercy! Is he not better, greater, more manly, & altogether more attractive to any but the purest Woman? And yet . . . he does not pretend, he does not wish to love you as I love you, Sara!” (CN 3148). He yearns to have her love him as intensely as he loves her: “even to make her already loving me love me to that unutterable, that impatience at the not enoughness of dependence, with