

Coleridge

Darker reflections



Richard Holmes

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Flamingo

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To Rose, with love

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ONE

ADRIFT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

1

“Signals, Drums, Guns, Bells, & the sound of Voices weighing up & clearing Anchors”. So Coleridge fled south aboard the *Speedwell*, expecting to die but half-hoping to be reborn. “Monday April 9th, 1804, really set sail...No health or Happiness without Work.”¹

Behind him he left his family under Southey’s care in the Lake District; he left the Wordsworths and his love Sara Hutchinson; he left Charles Lamb and Daniel Stuart and all his London friends; each of them anxiously speculating about his future. “Far art thou wandered now,” wrote Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, “in search of health,/And milder breezes...Speed thee well”.²

Ahead of him lay the glittering Mediterranean, the legendary outposts of Gibraltar, Malta and Sicily, a war-zone of fleets and harbour-fortresses, where he would fight his own battles against opium and despair. “Do we not pity our past selves?” he reflected in his new Notebook, using a special metallic pencil designed to withstand sea-salt. “Is not this always accompanied by Hope? It makes the Images of the Past vivid...Are not vivid Ideas themselves a sort of pleasure, as Music whether sad or lively, is always Music?”³

Down in his cabin on the first night, he watched the lights of England recede along the Cornish coast through the brass porthole above his narrow berth. The 130-ton ship moved uneasily, not rolling on its beam, but rocking sharply from stem to stern, “as a cruel Nurse rocks a screaming baby”.⁴ Coleridge lay with his eyes closed, thirty-one years old, but hearing childhood music. “Thought of a Lullaby song, to a Child on a Ship: great rocking Cradle...creak of main top Irons, rattle of Ropes, & squeak of the Rudder...And so play Bo-peep with the Rising Moon, and the Lizard Light. ‘There is thy native country, Boy! Whither art thou going to...’”⁵

2

Coleridge’s ship the *Speedwell* was a two-masted merchant brig, lightly armed with fourteen guns, but carrying a heavy cargo of eighty-four cannons in her hold destined for Trieste.⁶ Smartly trimmed in silver and gold, she was one of the fastest merchants in the fleet, commanded by a thoughtful Scotsman, Captain John Findlay, from whom Coleridge gradually extracted much sea-lover sailor’s yarns and sea-shanties.

She was part of the spring-time convoy of thirty-five ships, escorted by ten men-o’-war and the flagship HMS *Leviathan*, going to join Nelson’s fleet in the Mediterranean and carrying supplies to British and allied ports in the war against France and Spain. Having finally left Spithead on 9 April 1804, the first leg of their journey ran through the Bay of Biscay and round Cape St Vincent to Gibraltar.

As the French fleet under Villeneuve was bottled up by Nelson’s squadron off Toulon, the greatest danger came from privateers and corsairs operating out of Spanish and North African ports. So Captain Findlay cheerfully instructed Coleridge: “in a calm [they] will run out, pick up a merchant

Vessel under the very stern of the Commodore, as a Fox will a Fowl when the Wolf dog that guards the poultry yard can only bark at him from his Chain”.⁷ Coleridge kept a close eye on the wind throughout their voyage, as he did on all other maritime matters, so the whole imagery of the sea journey came to possess him.

3

By the second day he had found his sea-legs, and with hair flying and double-waistcoats flapping, he patrolled the deck agog with excitement, questioning and noting. Nothing seemed to escape his attention. If a merchantman lagged behind or failed to obey signals, the seventy-four-gun *Leviathan* fired warning shots at her – “Commodore’s strengthening *Pills for the Memory*”, and a fine of five shillings.⁸ Down in the first hold, a sheep abandoned its hay, “kneeling its poor face to the Deck, its knees black, worn and sore...alas! it came from flat peaceable meadows”.⁹ At victuals, a ship’s boy ran up the rigging to the main top “with a large Leg of Mutton swung, Albatross-fashion about his neck”.¹⁰

Always there was “great sea-Savannah” rolling unpastured about them, in all its changing lights and sounds. “The beautiful bright Slate, & the Soap stone colour by the Vessel’s side, in a brisk gale, immediately under the mast in a froth-cream, that throws itself into network, with its *brisk* sound, which the word *brisk* itself may be made to imitate by hissing on the ‘isk’...”¹¹ These observations went on constantly, by day and night, and several were later incorporated into the 1817 edition of the “*Mariner*”, such as the eerie light of the compass and rudder-man’s lamp “reflected with forms on the Main Sail”.¹²

Along with the crated ducks, three pigs, the melancholy sheep and a ship’s cat with kittens, Coleridge had two fellow passengers. They shared the cabin in increasingly pungent intimacy as the voyage progressed. One was a purple-faced lieutenant on half pay, who largely restricted his attention to the ship’s claret; the other was a plump and garrulous merry widow, a Mrs Ireland, “who would have wanted elbow-room on Salisbury Plain”.¹³ Mrs Ireland’s conversation was confined to food, and she dwelt lovingly on the roast potatoes, pickles and apricot tart to be expected in Malta.¹⁴

The cabin conditions were extremely cramped, and probably not improved by Coleridge’s tendency “in very gusty weather” to vomit up his food without warning. The process intrigued him, and it was never accompanied by seasickness: “it was an action as mechanical seemingly as that by which one’s glass or teacup is emptied by a thwart blow of the Sea”.¹⁵ Surprisingly, the merry “Mrs Carnosity” accepted this with good grace, and much worse which was to follow, after Gibraltar, when the mephitic stench from the bilge became overpowering.

Coleridge drew up a daily schedule for work in “a perseverant Spirit of industry”: it began with ginger tea and journal-writing, proceeded with a study of Wordsworth’s precious manuscript of the *Prelude* before dinner, and in the afternoon relaxed into Italian lessons and Dante; finally the night-watch was assigned to poetry and the completion of “*Christabel*”. But after the ginger tea and journal Coleridge usually found that he flagged and spent his time up on deck,¹⁶ or dozing uneasily on his bunk under a pile of books. These included, besides Dante and a portable Italian dictionary, a technical work on mineralogy, the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, and the complete works of Sir Thomas Browne, together with a mutinous crew of fresh lemons that he chewed to protect against scurvy.

He has much exercised by the bunk, which his large frame swaddled in double coats and double trousers, reduced to a precarious “mantel”. On inspection it measured five and a half feet long by

twenty inches wide. It was fine for sitting, eating, drinking, writing, even shaving: “it fails only in its original purpose, that of lying & sleeping: like a great Genius apprenticed to a wrong Trade”.¹⁷ But above it was the brass porthole upon which he lavished all his ingenuity. Finding it edged with small iron rings he laced these with cords to form a net, and stacked the bottom half with books to make a flat shelf for his kit. Inside this seamanlike cupboard he carefully arranged his shaving things, teacup and soup plate, supply of lemons and portable inkstand, whose unmoving pool of black ink seemed a suggestive contrast to the ceaseless lurching of the ship. ‘By charm and talismanic privilege: one of those Smooth places in the Mediterranean, where the breakers foam in a circle around, yet send in no wrinkles upon the mirror-bright, mirror-smooth *Lacus in mare*.’

Like the charmed pool of the imagination, the steady inkwell amidst the churning sea was “Imperium in Imperio”, a realm within a realm.¹⁸ This is what he hoped to become himself. To get a ship-shape, he also opened up the little escritoire that Lady Beaumont had given him, and found each drawer packed with comforts, which seized him “by a hundred Tentacula of Love and affection & pleasurable Remembrances”.¹⁹

4

Up on deck, he chatted to the sailors he always admired – “a neat handed Fellow who could shave himself in a storm without drawing blood”²⁰ – and recorded sextant readings, compass-bearings, cloud formations, star patterns and semaphore messages through the squadron. Above all he recorded the huge, beautiful complexity of the ship’s sails. They were constantly re-set throughout the fleet to form an endless series of visual harmonies. On Saturday, 14 April, he made no less than eleven pages of notes on these sail shapes. What interested him was their aesthetic values, their painterly suggestions of form and function, of energy transferred between curve and straight line. “The harmony of the Lines – the ellipses & semicircles of the bellying Sails of the Hull, with the variety of the one and the contingency of the other.”

He puzzled over their “obscure resemblance” to human shapes, to gestures of mental alertness, determination and attention. “The height of the naked mast above the sails, connected however with them by Pennant & Vane, associated I think, with the human form on a watch-tower: a general feeling – e.g. the *Men* on the tops of conical mountains...in Cumberland and Westmoreland.”²¹ This idea of the symbolic “watch-tower” haunted Coleridge. He later found that Nelson had described the navy in Malta as “the watch-tower of the Mediterranean”. Later still he used the image to describe Wordsworth’s dominance of the poetic horizon: “From the dread watch-tower of man’s absolute self”.²² Wordsworth indeed, as a man-o’-war, in full sail.

But Coleridge’s notes press further. “Every one of these sails is *known* by the Intellect to have a strict & necessary action & reaction on all the rest, and the whole is made up of parts...” This technical knowledge of the complementary function of the sails produces the sense of unity which we call beauty: “this phantom of complete visual wholeness in an object, which visually does not form a whole, by the influence *ab intra* of the sense of its perfect Intellectual Beauty or Wholeness”.²³ This subtle aesthetic emerged on the deck of the *Speedwell* in the Bay of Biscay. From it Coleridge dashed into a bracket a formulation which would become central to his *Biographia Literaria*: “all Passion unifies as it were by natural Fusion”.

It is evident from such notes that Coleridge was recovering fast from the mood of helpless despondency that had beset him in past months. At night, down in the cabin, he still had his “Dreams

of Terror & obscure forms”,²⁴ and sometimes awoke screaming as in the old, bad times at Keswick. In low moments he still thought mournfully of Asra too: “Why ain’t you here? This for ever: I have no rooted thorough thro feeling – & never exist wholly present to any Sight, to any sound, to any Emotion...feeling of yearning, that at times passes into Sickness.”²⁵ His poem to her, “Phantom”, dates from this part of the voyage.

All look and likeness caught from earth,
All accident of kin and birth,
Had pass’d away. There was no trace
Of aught on that illumined face,
Uprais’d beneath the rifted stone
But of one spirit all her own;
She, she herself, and only she,
Shone through her body visibly.²⁶

But his sense of excitement and stimulation was unmistakable. On 16 April the look-out “hailed the beautiful Coast of Portugal, & Oporto”, and Coleridge swarmed up on deck in his greatcoat, without bothering to put on his shoes. He began a long, enthusiastic letter to Robert Southey, sitting at his desk on the rudder case with the quacking ducks at his feet. He filled it with beautiful description of the coastline and jokes about Mrs Carnosity. “We sail on at a wonderful rate, & considering we are in a Convoy, all have made a most lucky Voyage to Gibraltar if we are not becalmed, & taken in the Gut...”²⁷

His main complaint was his bunk at night, “Dejection & Discomfort”, and the wallowing motion of the following sea. “*This damned Rocking...is troublesome & impertinent...like the presence & gossip of an old Aunt.*”²⁸ But the magic of the ships made up for everything: “Oh with what envy I have gazed at our Commodore, the Leviathan of 74 guns, the majestic & beautiful creature: sailing right before us...upright, motionless, as a church with its Steeple – as tho it moved by its will, as tho its speed were spiritual...”²⁹

Three nights later he was sitting at his post under a bright moon – “how hard to describe that sort of Queen’s metal plating, which the Moonlight forms on the bottle-green Sea” – with Spain on his left hand and the Barbary Coast on his right. “This is Africa! That is Europe! There is division, sharp boundary, abrupt change! and what are they in Nature – two Mountain banks, that make a noble River of the interfluent Sea...no division, no Change, no Antithesis.”³⁰

As the *Speedwell* slipped into the Mediterranean, he mused on this strange difference between human and natural geography, how human associations form our landscapes and boundaries far more than Nature herself. The power of human association with physical places and objects was perhaps the foundation of biography – “a Pilgrimage to see a great man’s Shin Bone found unmouldered in his Coffin”. Yet surely in this biography was a form of stupid superstition. “A Shakespeare, a Milton, a Bruno, exist in the mind as *pure Action*, defecated of all that is material & passive.” He could look at the fabled mulberry tree that Shakespeare planted without emotion. Yet as he gazed out into the moonlit path between two continents, Coleridge recognized deeper feelings of connection within himself. “At certain times, uncalled and sudden, subject to no bidding of my own or others, these Thoughts would come upon me, like a Storm, & fill the Place with something more than Nature.”³¹

Coleridge planned to put his meditations into a traveller’s anthology, “Comforts and

Consolations”,³² which was aimed at those who suffered from “speculative Gloom”. Perhaps partly inspired by Marcus Aurelius, it enshrined the significant idea that depression could be treated by stoic self-analysis, and the application of “the Reason, the Imagination, and the moral Feelings” to our own mental processes and mood-shifts. But writing to Southey he also mentioned the cheerfulness of unaccustomed abstemiousness: he was eating no meat, and despite his crate of fine wines, “marvellous Brandy, & Rum 20 years old” provided by Sir George Beaumont, was drinking nothing but lemonade. The abstinence also included opium, at least for the first fortnight.³³

5

At dawn on 19 April, Coleridge’s telescope picked out the great brown rock of Gibraltar’s “famous Apes Hill” detaching itself from the limestone sweeps and ridges of the Spanish coast. By the evening they were anchored under Europa Point and awaiting quarantine clearance – a rigid requirement in a zone of rapidly transmitted plagues and fevers, which killed off far more men than actual combat.

Coleridge was now entering a new world: colourful, hot, violent, polyglot, dominated by war and the rumours of war. People of every race and degree thronged the island – Jews, Arabs, Spaniards, Italians, Greeks. His first expedition along the quayside yielded a muleteer with the face of a monkey, a learned Jew in university dress, a Greek woman with earrings the size of “chain rings on a landing place for mooring boats”, a senior English officer with an “angel Face” woman on his arm, and “Soldiers of all Regiments & Runaway Sailors” of every nation.³⁴

Taken by Captain Findlay to Griffith’s Hotel, through a stinking labyrinth of backstreets, he found himself plunged into the active-service culture of the British navy abroad: patriotic, punctilious, hard-drinking, with its endless yarns about weather, battles and promotion. The first news he heard was of the previous Portsmouth convoy, largely wrecked in a foul-weather passage to the West Indies, and of Nelson’s dispatches intercepted by a French frigate.

He delivered letters of introduction to the navy chaplain, and to Major Adye, a young gunnery officer. Adye was a one-time pupil of his brother George’s, who sportingly volunteered to act as his guide to the rock. Then he spent the afternoon climbing over Europa Point, pleased to see the homely pink geraniums clinging to the walls among the exotic prickly pears. ‘Reluctantly I returned to a noisy Dinner of 17 Sea Captains, indifferent food, and burning Wines.’

Much discussion turned on Nelson’s Mediterranean strategy, and the importance of Malta for securing the trade routes into the eastern Mediterranean, the *casus belli* of 1803. “Struggle in the minds of the (native) inhabitants between their Dislike of English manners & their Dread of French Government. I find it a common opinion that if the Peace had continued the French would have monopolized the Commerce of the Levant.”³⁵ This was to become a topic of dominant importance during his time in Malta. Coleridge finally escorted Captain Findlay – “my now very tipsy Capt” – back to the *Speedwell*, and left him drinking with three other merchant masters in his cabin.

They spent five hectic days at Gibraltar. Coleridge togged himself out in sailor’s nankeen trousers and canvas shirt, and roamed all over the island, basking in the heat, drinking beer, making notes on plants, racial types, architecture, naval gossip and Mediterranean politics. In a packed letter to his newspaper editor Daniel Stuart, he leaped from subject to subject with all his old ebullience. The island was worth “a dozen plates by Hogarth”. The climate of the south would “re-create” him. Whole days were spent “scrambling about on the back of the Rock among the Monkeys: I am a match

for them in climbing, but in Hops & flying leaps they beat me.”³⁶

Meanwhile Major Adye briefed him on military matters, and sent a Corporal to escort him round the cliff-side gun emplacements – “The Noise so deafening in these galleries on the discharge of Guns, that the Soldiers’ Ears have bled.” By contrast, he scrambled alone into the deep silence of St Michael’s Cave, with its massy natural pillars and huge stalactites “the models of Trees in stone”, and wondered at the subterranean chambers (an old fascination) where men had descended three or four hundred feet “till the Smoke of their torches became intolerable”.³⁷

Sitting high up at Signal House, the very summit of Gibraltar, “which looks over the blue Sea-lake to Africa”, the magic of the Mediterranean south rose up to him in sight and sound and smell (the crushed tansy under his shoe). He thought how many mountains he had stood on in his life, and how the Rock was something profoundly new and mysterious, in all its warlike nameless shapes and intimations. “What a complex Thing! At its feet mighty ramparts establishing themselves in the Sea with their huge artillery – hollow trunks of Iron where Death and Thunder sleep; the gardens in deep Moats between lofty and massive walls; a Town of All Nations & all languages;...fences of the prickly aloe, strange Plant that does not seem to be alive, but to have been a thing fantastically carved in wood & coloured, some Hieroglyph or temple Ornament of undiscovered meaning.”³⁸

Coleridge was deeply excited by the Mediterranean, and his whole body responded to the physical impact of sun and sea. Moving easily among the soldiers and sailors, picking up their talk and laughter, he saw himself once again as footloose adventurer, poetic traveller, special correspondent for Daniel Stuart’s newspaper. His letter gives detailed naval “intelligence” of Nelson’s lost dispatches, and the *Hindoostan* burnt out with only four survivors and the loss of fifty guns and £300,000 of cargo, “chiefly of naval Stores of all kinds for Malta with a hundred Artificers”. Malta would be in “great Distress” for these losses, and he thought this would be the first crucial chance to get the news to London, by the return convoy: “after Letters will be better worth the postage”.³⁹

But, of course, beneath breathless activity, the manly sweating extraversion of the new self, old feelings stirred. “What change of place, Country, climate, company, situation, health – of Shrubs, Flowers, Trees – moving Seasons: & ever is that one feeling at my heart, felt like a faint Pain, a spot which it seems I could lay my finger on.” It was Asra, of course; and everything she represented of the Wordsworths, the Lakes, lost love.

The past self stood like a ghostly reflection in every company; the remembered hills rose up behind every sunlit cliff and rock. “I talk loud or eager, or I read or meditate the abstrusest Researches; or I laugh, jest, tell tales of mirth; & ever as it were, within & behind, I think & image you; and while I am talking of Government or War or Chemistry, there comes ever into my bodily eye some Tree, beneath which we have rested, some Rock where we have walked together, or on the perilous road edging high above the Crummock Lake, where we sat beneath the rock, & those dear Lips pressed my forehead.”⁴⁰ This was the cargo of memory that could not be sunk or abandoned or burnt; the secret self that crouched below the waterline.

Coleridge’s last day on Gibraltar was spent on a “long & instructive walk” with Major Adye round the entire defences, from the gun emplacements to the brewery, discussing British strategy in the Mediterranean. They visited St Michael’s Cave again, and Coleridge was more and more struck by its mysterious rock formations, “the obelisks, the pillars, the rude statues of strange animals” like some cathedral of half-created forms and monuments.⁴¹

They planned to meet again in Malta, and Adye promised to carry home to England whatever letters and journals Coleridge had prepared. Back on the *Speedwell*, they discussed the dangers of the

voyage ahead, and sailors' superstitions about dates and positions of the moon which reminded Coleridge of his *Mariner*. Captain Findlay said briskly, "Damn me! I have no superstition", but then revealed that he thought "Sunday is a really lucky day to sail on." They were interrupted by a huge cargo-ship, which nearly rammed them as they lay at anchor, and were only saved by Findlay shouting directions to the lubberly crew to go about. "Myself, the Capt. and the Mate all confessed, that our knees trembled under us," for the towering fore-castle threatened to strike them amidships and sink them instantly. This at any rate was not a good omen.⁴²

6

The *Speedwell* got under way from Gibraltar on 25 April 1804, now escorted by HMS *Maidstone* and hoping to make the second leg of their journey in a week. In the event it took twenty-eight days, alternately beaten by storms and transfixed by calms, which took a terrible toll on Coleridge's health and spirits. Initially his journal records the continuing beauty of the seascape, the excitement of a turtle hunt, hornpipe dancing on the deck, and long grog sessions in Captain Findlay's cabin.

To beguile the time he began an essay on Superstition, "taken in its philosophical and most comprehensive Sense", as it affects men of action – soldiers, sailors, fishermen, farmers, even lovers and gamblers – who are placed "in an absolute Dependence on Powers & Events, over which they have no Control".⁴³ He noted how the patterns of "an old Idolatry" rose in response to physical fear, and fixed themselves angrily on scapegoats or astronomical signs, like the star which dogs a crescent moon. There began to be talk of a "Jonas in the Fleet", and he dryly remarked that this was one advantage of sailing in a convoy. "On a single Vessel the Jonas must have been sought among ourselves."

Conditions aboard the *Speedwell* steadily deteriorated. The "Mephitic of the bilge burst forth, like a fury" filling the cabins with nauseous stench, turning the gold paintwork red and black and covering everything with a kind of "silvery grease" which stank of sulphur. (Coleridge made a note to ask Humphry Davy about the chemistry of this effect.)⁴⁴ He became incapable of holding down food, and began to resort to opium: "desperately sick, ill, abed, one deep dose after another".⁴⁵ His unhappy dreams of Asra returned, mixed up with memories of schoolboy bullying and deprivation, "Christ Hospitalized the forms & incidents".^{46*}

On 1 May, in wet, foggy, oppressive weather, they had drifted back towards the Barbary coast of Carthagina. "We are very nearly on the spot, where on Friday last about this same hour we caught the Turtles – And what are 5 days' toiling to windward just not to lose ground, to almost 5 years. Alas! alas! what have I been doing on the Great Voyage of Life since my return from Germany but fretting upon the front of the wind – well for me if I have indeed kept my ground even!"⁴⁷

On 4 May, a wind got up, and Coleridge composed a grateful sea-shanty for Captain Findlay, "who foretold a fair wind/ Of a constant mind", though "neither Poet, nor Sheep" could yet eat.⁴⁸ But the wind turned into a squall, and then a storm, which carried away their foremost yard-arm on 6 May. He sank further into opium, besieged by "these Sleeps, these Horrors, these Frightful Dreams of Despair". He could no longer get up on deck, and was now seriously ill, with violent stomach pains and humiliating flatulence. A flowered curtain was rigged round his bunk, and he began to hallucinate, seeing "yellow faces" in the cloth. The ship was again becalmed, and he thought the flapping sails were fish dying on the deck.⁴⁹ Mr Hardy, the surgeon of the *Maidstone*, was alerted and the rumour went round the convoy that one of the *Speedwell's* passengers was dying. Coleridge knew he had

become the Jonas of the fleet.

The opium doses had completely blocked his bowels. The shame, guilt and horrid symbolism of this seized upon him. His body had closed upon itself, just as his mind had become fruitless and unproductive. He was a vessel full of mephitic horror. His journal becomes extraordinarily explicit, and details his sufferings with weird, unsparing exactitude. "Tuesday Night, a dreadful Labour, & fruitless throes, of costiveness – individual faeces, and constricted orifices. Went to bed & dozed & started in great distress."⁵⁰

Wednesday, 9 May was "a day of Horror". He spent the morning sitting over a bucket of hot water, "face convulsed, & the sweat streaming from me like Rain". Captain Findlay brought the *Speedwell* alongside the *Maidstone*, and sent for Mr Hardy. "The Surgeon instantly came, went back for Pipe & Syringe & returned & with extreme difficulty & the exertion of his utmost strength injected the latter. Good God! – What a sensation when the obstruction suddenly shot up!" Coleridge lay with a hot water bottle on his belly, "with pains & sore uneasiness, & indescribable desires", instructed to retain himself as long as possible. "At length went: O what a time! – equal in pain to any before. Anguish took away all disgust, & I picked out the hardened matter & after awhile was completely relieved. The poor mate who stood by me all this while had the tears running down his face."⁵¹

The humiliation of this experience never left Coleridge. He knew it was caused by opium, and he reverted to it frequently in his Notebooks, and even in his later letters. From now on he dreaded the enema, as the secret sign and punishment for his addiction. The pain of "frightful constipation when the dead filth impales the lower Gut", was unlike any other illness, because it was shameful and could not be talked about "openly to all" like rheumatism, or other chronic complaints. It crept into his dreams, and haunted him with its grotesque symbolism of false birth and unproductivity. "To weep & sweat & moan & scream for parturience of an excrement with such pangs & such convulsions as a woman with an Infant heir of Immortality: for Sleep a pandemonium of all the shames and miseries of the past Life from earliest childhood all huddled together, and bronzed with one stormy Light of Terror & Self-torture. O this is hard, hard, hard."⁵²

It was "a Warning". Profoundly shaken, he resolved – as he was to do time and again in later years – to do without opium altogether. This resolution was fierce and genuine on each occasion. But what Coleridge could not know was that by now complete withdrawal from the drug was physiologically a virtual impossibility without skilled medical aid. He could no longer do it alone, by a simple effort of will. So each time his will was broken, he suffered and lost confidence in his own powers. This terrible repetition of resolution and failure – like one of the endless, circular punishments of Dante's *Inferno* – shaped much of what happened in the second part of his life. Yet he never stopped resolving, and this dogged determination to battle on also became characteristic and took him through experiences that few of his contemporaries shared or even remotely understood.

Aboard the *Speedwell*, at midnight on 13 May, he turned towards his Creator for help: "O dear God! give me strength of Soul to make one thorough trial – if I land at Malta – spite all horrors to go through one month of unstimulated Nature – yielding to nothing but manifest danger of Life – O great God! Grant me grace truly to look into myself, & to begin the serious work of Self-amendment... Have Mercy on me Father & God!...who with undeviating Laws Eternal yet carest for the falling of the feather from the Sparrow's wing."⁵³

Crawling back on deck, he found they were in sight of Sardinia. A hawk with battered plumage flew overhead, and settled on the bowsprit, until the sailors shot at it. It flew off heavily among the

other ships, and Coleridge listened to the firing from further and further away, as each crew refused him hospitality in turn. “Poor Hawk! O strange Lust of Murder in Man! – It is not cruelty: it is mere non-feeling from non-thinking.”⁵⁴ He ate rhubarb for his bowels, and was cosseted by “the good Mrs Ireland”, never again referred to as “Mrs Carnosity”.

Gradually his thoughts grew calmer. “Scarcely a day passes but something new in fact or illustration rises up in me, like Herbs and Flowers in a Garden in early Spring; but the combining Power, the power to do, the manly effective Will, that is dead or slumbers most diseasedly – Well I will pray for the Hour when I ‘may quit the tiresome sea & dwell on Shore’...” He sat at the rudder-case and wrote notes on the moon, the notion of Sublimity, and the nature of poetry. “Poetry – a rationalized Dream – dealing out to manifold Forms our own Feelings – that never perhaps were attached by us consciously to our own Personal Selves”.⁵⁵

7

By 17 May Coleridge was quite restored, “uncommonly well”, and observing the noble blue peak of Mount Etna rising out of the eastern waters. By dawn on the 18th the *Speedwell* was in clear sight of Malta, and Mrs Ireland was confiding in him that she expected to be met by her lover.⁵⁶ Captain Findlay put on all sail, and by 4 p.m. they were sliding under the huge sandstone fortifications of Valletta harbour ahead of the *Maidstone*. Observing the great battlements and citadel, originally built by the Knights of Malta to withstand the Great Siege of 1565, Coleridge felt like Aeneas arriving at Carthage.

Leaving his boxes to be unloaded, he disembarked in the first cutter and clambered breathlessly up the long stairs of Old Bakery Street, feeling like his own Mariner, “light as a blessed Ghost”. He was glad to be alive. He made straight for the Casa de St Foix, the house of John Stoddart, the Chief Advocate of Malta. It stood at the top of the street, a large building in orange freestone, with brightly painted wooden casements and enclosed balconies, commanding a dramatic view over the Marsamxett harbour. Round it spread a labyrinth of tilting streets, enclosed by huge bastions, which echoed with the bustle and shout of Maltese street-vendors, the barking of dogs, the clanging of church bells and rumble of donkeycarts. Music poured from the taverns, as the innkeepers and prostitutes prepared to welcome the new influx of British sailors.

Coleridge was stunned by the noise and activity. “They are the noisiest race under Heaven... sudden shot-up explosive Bellows – no cries in London would give you the faintest idea of it. When you pass by a fruit stall, the fellow will put his Hand like a speaking trumpet to his mouth & shoot such a Thunder bolt of Sound full at you.”⁵⁷

After two hours of confusion and delay among the servants, Stoddart finally appeared and greeted him with a further “explosion of surprise and welcome”. He was given rooms and promised introductions. So began Coleridge’s sixteen-month sojourn on the tiny, rocky, Mediterranean outpost.

Initially, Coleridge’s plans were uncertain. He would restore his health, travel to Sicily perhaps, keep a journal, maybe find a temporary post in the colonial administration. He would write essays on art or politics, and send articles to Stuart. He would let the Mediterranean sun bleach out his heartache and his opium sickness. What actually fixed these plans was his meeting with the civilian governor of Malta, Sir Alexander Ball. It was, Coleridge later wrote, “that daily and familiar intercourse with him which made the fifteen months from May 1804 to October 1805, in many respects, the most memorable and instructive period of my life”.⁵⁸ It was also, perhaps, the most unlikely of all his

friendships, for Ball was, *par excellence*, the man of action, a wartime admiral, confidant of Nelson, hero of the battle of Aboukir Bay, and forceful administrator and strategist.

Coleridge first met Ball on 20 May, when he called officially at the Governor's palace, to deliver letters of recommendation to him and General Villette, the military commander. The great palace with its huge shadowy inner courtyard, planted with palm trees, rather overawed him. The meeting in a vast chamber hung with crimson silk and Italian religious pictures was coldly formal. "A very polite man; but no hopes, I see clearly, of any situation."⁵⁹ Ball was a tall, avuncular figure, with a high domed forehead and small observant eyes, who said little. But the following day Coleridge was invited out to his country palace at San Antonio.

Coleridge rode out with unaccustomed punctuality at 6 a.m., and breakfasted with Ball in a garden full of orange and lemon trees. This time, a Mr Lane, the tutor of Ball's son, was present and the conversation became more general. It was later that Ball, riding back alone with Coleridge to Valletta through the little stony lanes overlooking the harbour, began to talk of the role of luck in naval actions and life generally.

Turning to his visitor, Ball suddenly asked if he thought the old proverb was true, that "Fortune Favours Fools". It could have been meant as a joke, but to his surprise Coleridge launched into a brilliant monologue on notions of chance, accident, contingency and superstition; and contrasted these with the underlying patterns of scientific law and human skills. In what sense, he asked, could it be said that Humphry Davy's discoveries in chemistry were lucky? In what sense that a great commander's victories were fortunate?⁶⁰

Ball was impressed, and probably also amused. He began to tell Coleridge his own life story, and on this conversation Coleridge later felt was founded "the friendship and confidence, with which he afterwards honoured me". It was one of the "most delightful mornings" he ever passed. Very soon he was riding with the Governor over most of the island, and the Coleridgean floodgates were opened, day after day in June. But Coleridge also listened, and Ball's anecdotes and opinions came to fill his Malta Notebooks. Years later, in 1809, they became the basis for a biographical study – both of Ball and Nelson – in which the notion of leadership and courage, of command and self-command, is philosophically examined.⁶¹

Besides dealing with the civil administration of Malta, most pressing being the matters of law decrees and corn supplies, Ball was also engaged in a continuous debate with Nelson off Toulon, and the War Office in London, over the exact objectives of British strategy in the Mediterranean, as the war unfolded. Ball's central idea was that Britain should permanently occupy both Malta and Sicily, with a view to controlling the sea-routes via Egypt to India. By mid-June he had enlisted Coleridge in this top-level and highly confidential discussion, commissioning him to draft a series of "position papers" setting forth arguments with the addition of whatever Coleridge could glean from books, pamphlets or newspapers.

This was work well adapted to Coleridge's experience as a leader writer for Daniel Stuart on the *Courier*. Over the next weeks he produced four long papers, the first of which, "The French in the Mediterranean", was dispatched to Nelson on 7 July 1804. Others followed on "Algeria", "Malta", and "Egypt", which were forwarded to Granville Penn in Downing Street, for presentation to the secretary of state for war, during the summer. A fifth paper on "Sicily" was completed in September.⁶² It was evidently this work which convinced Ball of Coleridge's real abilities; not merely a poet of genius, he would crisply inform the British Ambassador in Naples. Coleridge was given official rooms in the Governor's palace and a salary, all within five weeks of his arrival in Malta.

On 5 July he wrote triumphantly to Sotheby, “I have hitherto lived with Dr Stoddart, but tomorrow shall take up residence at the Palace, in a suite of delightfully cool & commanding Rooms which Sir Alexander was so kind as not merely to offer me but to make me feel that he wished me to accept the Offer... Sir A.B. is a very extraordinary man – indeed a great man. And he is really the abstract Idea of a wise & good Governor.”⁶³

As Coleridge got into the new routine of his work, his health improved and his spirits soared. He breakfasted, dined and took evening coffee with the Governor, meeting foreign diplomats and navy staff, and making contact with leading Maltese figures like Vittorio Barsoni, the influential editor of the *Malta Gazette*. “I have altered my whole system,” he wrote to his wife in July: he was getting up to swim before sun-rise, eating regular meals, spending a few shillings on summer clothes and ice-creams, and filling his Notebooks with Italian lessons and Ball’s table-talk.

With ceaseless, extrovert activity he was able to keep opium at bay, avoid depression, and even stop longing so obsessively for Asra to be with him – a shift of feeling he hoped to put into “a poem in 2 parts”.⁶⁴ He found “Salvation in never suffering myself to be idle ten minutes together; but either to be actually *composing*, or walking, or in Company. – For the moment I begin to think, my feelings drive me almost to agony and madness; and then comes on the dreadful *Smothering* on my chest etc.”⁶⁵

To Stuart he wrote, that “after being near death, I hope I shall return in Spirit a regenerated Creature”; and also with his finances much improved. He started sending confidential copies of the “position papers” for the *Courier* to publish anonymously (a rather daring form of unofficial “leaks”) “some Sibylline Leaves, which I wrote for Sir A.B. who sent them to the Ministry – they will give you my Ideas on the importance of the Island... you will of course take them – only not in the same words.” If he survived, he would become “a perfect man of business”, and already he considered himself “a sort of diplomatic Understrapper hid in Sir Alexander’s Palace”. In the rocky, sun-beaten island (“86 in the Shade”), he was starting to flourish again.

8

In mid-July 1804 Sir Alexander moved his family and staff four miles inland, to the summer residence at San Antonio, with its high cool rooms, exotic gardens, and magnificent panoramas over Citta Vecchia (Medina) and the eastern approaches. The diplomatic understrapper went with them, now admitted to real intimacy, and was given a fine room immediately under the tower from where he could turn his telescope over much of the island.⁶⁶

There was a holiday atmosphere, and in the early mornings he wandered for hours in the high stony pastures, never out of the sound of “Steeple Clock and Churchbells”, chewing the pods of locust trees “full of an austere dulcacid Juice, that reminds me of a harsh Pear”. He was continually amazed by the gorgeous variety of trees and shrubs in the San Antonio garden, a sort of oasis among the rocky landscape, where he sat making notes. He listed pomegranate, prickly pear, pepper tree, oleander, dat (“with its Wheel of Plumage”), myrtle, butterfly-flower, walnut, mulberry, orange and lemon.⁶⁷ He wished he had a copy of Linnaeus to look them all up in.

Coleridge was happier at San Antonio in the summer of 1804 than he had been for many months. He had “manifest strength and spirits”.⁶⁸ Beside the work for Sir Alexander, he wrote the long-promised letter to Wordsworth laying out the philosophical structure for “The Recluse”, completed a travel journal of the Malta voyage for the Beaumonts (which he later intended to publish), and laid his

plans for an autumn expedition to Sicily and Naples.

His Notebooks contain exquisite observations on wildlife, such as his description of the brilliantly coloured green lizards with their bright gold spots and “darting and angular” movements. Some of these approach the condition of prose-poems, meditations on the relations between man and animal, which foreshadow the poems of D. H. Lawrence. The lizard’s attentive posture, “the Life of the threddy Toes...his head & innocent eye sidelong towards me, his side above the forepaw throbbing with a visible pulse”, becomes an emblem of Nature’s mysterious and fragile beauty. One “pretty fellow” lying frozen under Coleridge’s gaze in a network of sun and shade, seems to summon up a protective power to save him from all human interference: “...then turned his Head to me, depressed it, & looked up half-watching, half-imploring; at length taking advantage of a brisk breeze that made all the Network dance & toss, & darted off as if an Angel of Nature had spoken in the breeze: – Off! I’ll take care, he shall not hurt you.”⁶⁹

9

On 10 August Coleridge set sail for Sicily, in the company of Major Adye who had now arrived from Gibraltar. Sir Alexander Ball generously retained him on his Private Secretary’s salary of £25 per month, and supplied him with a letter of introduction to the honorary consul at Syracuse, G. F. Leckie. But first Coleridge and Adye struck out for Catania along the coast, and made a strenuous ascent of Mount Etna, with local guides. They camped at one of the *casina* or shelters just above the tree-line, where the ground “scorched” their feet, and dined off meat barbecued over an open fire and drank the local wine, chatting in bad Italian to some beautiful local peasant girls: “voices shrill but melodious, especially the 21 years old wheedler & talker, who could not reconcile to herself that I did not understand her: yet in how short a time a man living so would understand a language”.⁷⁰ Around them stretched the desolate lava field, purple in the shadows, with a “smoke-white Bloom upon it”.⁷¹

Coleridge seems to have made two ascents to the crater itself, though curiously there is no description in his Notebooks of the bleak, ashy lip or of his impressions from the top. Yet he seems to have reached it, for ten years later the image came surging back to him in the time of his worst opium struggles when his religious faith was threatened by a dark pit of despair.⁷² “I recollect when I stood on the summit of Etna, and darted my gaze down the crater; the immediate vicinity was discernible, till lower down, obscurity gradually terminated in total darkness. Such figures exemplify many truths revealed in the Bible. We pursue them until, from the imperfection of our faculties, we are lost in impenetrable night.”⁷³

At the time he recalled only the blessed cool of the Benedictine monastery at Nicolsai as they returned, and the next day the sun on Etna rising “behind Calabria out of the midst of the Sea...deep crimson...skies coloured with yellow a sort of Dandelion”.⁷⁴ On the way down he copied a Latin inscription from the monastery gardens. “Here under Black Earth, Ashes of Holy Monks lie Hid. Marvel not. Sterile sand of Sacred Bones, everywhere becomes Fruit, And loads the fruit-Tree Branches...Go on your road, All things will be well.”⁷⁵

At the ancient port of Syracuse, made famous by Thucydides’s account of the Greek Expedition and its catastrophic defeat, Coleridge was given rooms by Leckie in his idyllic villa on the site of the Timoleon antiquities overlooking the bay. For two months it was his base for a series of rambles round the island, with Leckie often acting as his guide. Leckie was a formidable figure. A classical scholar and adventurer, he had farmed in India, knocked about the Mediterranean, and finally settled

with a beautiful wife in Sicily, where his money and fluency in Italian and French set him on equal terms with the local aristocracy. His hospitality, his pungent views, and the flirtatiousness of his glamorous wife, made the Villa Timoleon a popular port of call among numerous English travellers and naval officers, and he remained in regular contact with Sir Alexander. Coleridge's admiration of Mrs Leckie was expressed in a subtle appreciation of her jewellery: "Mrs Leckie's opal surrounded with small brilliants: grey blue & the wandering fire that moves about it; and often usurps the whole."⁷⁶

The air of voluptuous enchantment which descended over this Sicilian sojourn was oddly disturbing to Coleridge. As he walked and rode between the classical ruins, he was haunted by the discovery that the fields were full of poppies cultivated for opium. Leckie described to him the process in expert detail. "The white poppy seed, sown in the months of October & November, the plants weeded to 8 inches distance, & well watered till the plants are about $\frac{1}{2}$ a foot high, when a compost of dung, without Earth, & Ashes is spread over the beds – a little before the flowers appear, again watered profusely, till the capsules are half-grown, at which time the opium is collected."⁷⁷

Leckie showed him how each pod was incised with a knife, and Coleridge pulled out the grains with his thumb. Later he learnt that Indian hemp was also grown extensively, and that the whole island was a paradise of narcotics. Leckie, an experienced farmer, reckoned the opium crop was worth over £50 a square foot. The place where Coleridge had once dreamed of settling with Asra and the Wordsworths in an ideal Mediterranean Pantisocracy, was in reality for him one of the most dangerous places on earth.

Sicily held other temptations. On 26 September the opera season opened at Syracuse, and Coleridge first saw the young Italian prima donna Anna-Cecilia Bertozzi.⁷⁸ He was immediately captivated by her singing of Metastasio's aria, "Amo Te Solo" ("I love none but Thee"). He was swept by "a phantom of memory", and experienced the "meeting soul" of music, for Cecilia (named after the patron saint of music) fatally reminded him of a younger version of Asra.⁷⁹

By 11 October he had met her backstage, and had made the first of a series of secret assignations though "the voice of Conscience whispered to me, concerning myself & my intent of visiting la P[rima] D[onna] tomorrow".⁸⁰ These assignations continued through October and early November, becoming a source of both guilt and delight, so that the green lane with its long line of softly swaying trees up to the Opera House began to haunt him with its "aromatic Smell of Poplars". His "cruelly unlike Thoughts" would come upon him at each return, with gathered force: "What recollections, if I were worthy of indulging them."⁸¹

Cecilia's singing could be heard outside in the Opera House yard and the street, and the "ragged boys & girls" would learn her songs after a couple of performances, so that even during the day the back-alleys of Syracuse rang with the sound of urchins mimicking her "with wonderful accuracy & agility of Voice".⁸² He also saw Cecilia dancing at the public balls, and perhaps danced with her, at least in imagination: "Dancing, when poor human Nature lets itself loose from bondage & circumstances of anxious selfish care: it is Madness."⁸³

He was invited to her dressing-rooms, and on at least one occasion to her bedroom. A single tiny fragment of verse about Cecilia survives in his Notebooks, though almost obliterated by a later hand: "...the Breeze, And let me float & think on Asra/Thee, And...Body...myself in suffering...applied spiritually."⁸⁴ Perhaps he was also thinking of Cecilia when he described the quintet singing at the Syracuse Opera, with voices that "leave, seek, pursue, oppose...and embrace each other again", as the

sweet image of “wayward yet fond lovers” who quarrel and make up and achieve “the total melting union”.⁸⁵

It would not be surprising if, after five months alone in the Mediterranean, cut off from those he loved, immersed in the wine and languors of the South, and looking for hope and “regeneration”, the 32-year-old Coleridge had embarked on an affair with the enticing Cecilia. One might even hope that he did, if only to release him from the ghost of Asra. During a violent autumnal thunderstorm at the Villa Timoleon, which broke like “an explosion of artillery” and set the dogs barking throughout Syracuse, Coleridge suddenly recalled another femme fatale he had created: “Vivid flashes in mid day, the terror without the beauty. A ghost by day time: Geraldine.”⁸⁶

But the evidence of the Notebooks is very thin at the time, and Cecilia herself remains a mystery. She was evidently young, probably in her early twenties, for her first recorded performances were at Rome in 1798–9.⁸⁷ She was also talented, because she became the prima donna at Palermo by 1809. Coleridge’s later recollections also suggest that she was beautiful, naive and vivacious, and fully prepared to take him to bed. In these recollections of 1808 Coleridge admitted how much he longed for Cecilia during those dreamy weeks: “the outworks of my nature [were] already carried by the sweetness of her Temper, the child-like Simplicity of her Smiles, and the very great relief to my Depression and deathly Weighing-down of my heart (and the Bladder) from her Singing & Playing, so that I began to crave after her society.” There was sexual attraction, he felt, on her side too. “Neither her Beauty, with all her power of employing it, neither her heavenly Song, were as dangerous as her sincere vehemence of attachment to me...it was not mere Passion, & yet Heaven forbid that I should call it Love.”

But paradoxically it was the directness of Cecilia’s feelings, her sunny Italian spontaneity, that seemed to frighten him. It was too simple, too sexual, for Coleridge’s anxious sense of self and religious conscience to accept. He craved, but he could not give way. When it actually came to the point, he could not deliver himself up into the arms of the warm South. “Remorse and the total loss of Self-Esteem would have been among the Knots of the Cords by which I should have been held.” What was offered to him as a joyful release, came to seem like a terrible trap, a bondage. That is why, it seems, Coleridge finally refused Cecilia.

Coleridge explained this to himself as Asra’s triumph, a triumph of his better nature. He was saved by a vision of Asra which came to him even in Cecilia’s bedroom. “When I call to mind the heavenly Vision of her Face, which came to me as the guardian Angel of my Innocence and Peace of Mind, at Syracuse, at the bedside of the too fascinating Siren, against whose witcheries Ulysses’ Wax would have proved but a Half-protection, poor Cecilia Bertozzi...I was saved by that vision, wholly & exclusively by it, and sure I am, that nothing on earth but it could at that time have saved me.”⁸⁸

But was he saved? Or had he delivered himself up into a far more subtle bondage, the cords of his old English dreams which he had hoped to break? There is no mention of more conventional loyalties, his marriage vows, his feelings for his children. It was almost as if Asra had prevented him from discovering something vital about his own sexual nature, had saved him not from sin but from self-knowledge. She had preserved his “Innocence and Peace of Mind”, not his purity.

Perhaps Coleridge no longer wanted real women at all, or only in his opium dreams, singing like Abyssinian maids of Mount Abora. Were these his “cruelly unlike Thoughts” on the way to visit Cecilia? He wrote gloomily: “I tremble to think what I was at that moment on the very brink of being surprised into – by the prejudices of the shame of sex, as much as by the force of its ordinary Impulses.”⁸⁹ Perhaps those ordinary impulses were being destroyed.

Whatever really happened between Coleridge and Cecilia Bertozzi, the end of October 1804 marked a turning point in Sicily. His birthday entry of 21 October was miserable, lamenting his “habit of bedrugging the feelings, & bodily movements, & habit of dreaming”. He had “fled like a cowed Dog” from the thought of his age, “so completely has a whole year passed, with scarcely the fruits of a month...I am not worthy to live...I have done nothing! Not even layed up any material, any inward stores – of after action!”⁹⁰

In fact he had just sent off the large packet of work to Wordsworth and Sir George Beaumont (including now a Sicilian journal) in the care of Major Adye, who was returning to England via Gibraltar. And he was planning a trip to Messina and Naples. Daniel Stuart was beginning to use his Malta papers for leaders in the *Courier* in London, while Wordsworth was tracing his journeys in imagination in Book X of *The Prelude*, re-dedicating the poem to Coleridge the wanderer.

Oh! Wrap him in your Shades, ye Giant Woods,
On Etna’s side, and thou, O flowery Vale
Of Enna! Is there not some nook of thine,
From the first playtime of the infant earth
Kept sacred to restorative delights?

Wordsworth was blissfully imagining Coleridge, “a Visitant on Etna’s top”, a “lonely wanderer” with “a heart more ripe” for pleasure, drawing inspiration from Aresthusa’s fountain (on the quayside at Syracuse) and “divine” nourishment from Theocritus’s bees who fed the exiled Comates.⁹¹ He hoped he would linger there as a happy votary, “and not a Captive, pining for his home”. Nonetheless Wordsworth also expected Coleridge to return as promised by the following spring, and sort out his marriage and his domestic arrangements.

Coleridge clambered over the ruins of the Greek amphitheatre above Leckie’s villa, but was more drawn to the area of caves and limestone quarries with its famous “Ear of Dionysus” and the “Quarry of the Capuchins”, which with its groves and flowering cliffs appeared a sort of miniature garden of Eden. (Yet it was here that 7,000 captive Athenian soldiers died in a kind of concentration camp in 413 BC.)⁹² Serious archaeology did not begin until a generation later, but in this autumn of 1804 the most beautiful of all Sicilian statues, the headless Landolina Venus with her shining marble breasts and large voluptuous limbs, was dug out of the earth like a spirit returning from the underworld.

Coleridge described the ruins and the caves in detail, with Etna’s cone hovering above the Epipothia ridge in its “floating mantle of white smoke”; and he took a boat to Tremiglia where Neptune was buried under a bay tree, “with vines wreathing about it: Sleep, Shade, & Quiet!”⁹³ Standing high above the bay of Syracuse, surrounded by these buried antiquities and strange portents, he watched the sun go down into the sea, and wrote one of his most haunting Mediterranean fragments, “A Sunset”. Its thirteen lines end with a shiver of Delphic prophesy, as if the classically haunted landscape would soon release its violent gods and heroes once again as the sun disappears.

Abrupt, as Spirits vanish, he is sunk!
A soul-like breeze possesses all the wood. The boughs, the sprays have stood
As motionless as stands the ancient trunk!
But every leaf through all the forest flutters,
And deep the cavern of the fountain mutters.⁹⁴

Despite the affair with Cecilia Bertozzi, or perhaps because of it, Coleridge was now anxious to press on to Naples. He was restless in Syracuse, decayed and baroque, with its corruption and gossip, and the oppressive omnipresence of its Catholic priests. “I found no one native with whom I could talk of anything but the weather and the opera: ignorant beyond belief – the churches take up the third part of the whole city, & the Priests are numerous as the Egyptian Plague.”⁹⁵

On 23 October, Sir Alexander sent him a letter of recommendation to Hugh Elliott, the British Minister at the Court of King Ferdinand in Naples. It shows that Coleridge was already held in high esteem, and puts his private feelings of worthlessness in a more generous perspective.

My dear Sir, I beg to introduce to your Excellency Mr Coleridge whose literary fame I make no doubt is well known to you. He possesses great genius, a fine imagination and good judgement, and these qualities are made perfect by an excellent heart and good moral character. He has injured his health by intense study, and he is recommended to travel for its re-establishment. You will have much pleasure in his conversation...⁹⁶

But on 5 November, just as he was preparing to board a carriage for Messina, Coleridge was dramatically drawn back into his new role as public servant and all further wanderings were cut short. A diplomatic incident took place in Syracuse harbour, and Leckie deputed Coleridge, as Sir Alexander’s personal emissary, to deal with it. As unexpected as it might seem, Coleridge became part of the British naval war machine.

Four days previously a French privateer had sailed into Syracuse with two captured British merchantmen, claiming the rights of a neutral port to unload its prizes. A British navy cutter, *L’Hirondelle*, was immediately dispatched from Valletta to dispute the claim, and anchored alongside the privateer with broadside cannons run out, “tompions” uncovered and trained on the French ship. Both captains appealed to the Sicilian Governor, while threatening to blow each other out of the water. Officially the matter turned on the validity of the privateer’s papers, and whether it had the right to take prizes on the high seas under the normal articles of war between the two sovereign states, or whether it was simply a pirate flying the French flag for its own convenience. Unofficially, as so often in these incidents, everything depended on what political pressure could be brought to bear.

Leckie seems to have realized early on that the privateer’s papers were in fact valid, so he took Coleridge with him to make the best of a bad job. The priority was to defuse an ugly situation at the harbour front, where the British Captain Skinner soon found himself surrounded by a hostile crowd. When Leckie and Coleridge arrived at seven in the evening, bloodshed seemed imminent. “On stepping out of the carriage I found by the Torches that about 300 Soldiers were drawn up on the shore opposite the English Cutter, and that the walls etc. were manned: Mr Skinner and two of his Officers were on the rampart, and the Governor and a crowd of Syracusan nobles with him at the distance of two or three yards from Mr Skinner.”⁹⁷ The Governor “talked, or rather screamed, indeed incessantly”.

Coleridge was surprised to discover that he himself remained calm. “I never witnessed a more pitiable scene of confusion, & weakness, and manifest determination to let the French escape.” The French privateer captain hurled abuse from a nearby wall, but was stoically ignored. Leckie and Coleridge insisted that nothing should be done until the privateer’s papers were translated (from Italian) and properly examined the following day. At last order was restored, the French crew were p

under guard at the Lazaretto, and Captain Skinner was removed to the safety of Leckie's house.

~~Over the next two days Coleridge visited the Syracuse Governor, and disputed the privateer's papers. He also drew up a long and vividly circumstantial account of the whole incident for Sir Alexander. It was soon clear that the prize and ransom money would not be released: the Governor "will acquit the Crew of Piracy, and suffer them to escape, and probably make a complaint against Mr Skinner".~~

Coleridge quickly realized that it was now Captain Skinner who was in difficulties, having failed in his mission and being liable to reprimand in Malta. He therefore heavily weighted his report in Skinner's favour, and volunteered to return to Valletta on *L'Hirondelle* to deliver the report in person. He wrote firmly: "It is but justice however to notice the coolness, dignity and good sense, with which Mr Skinner acted throughout the whole Business, and which formed an interesting Contrast to the noisy Imbecility of the Governor, and the brutal Insolence of the Commander of the Privateer."⁹⁸

This supportive action of Coleridge for the young captain, in such an unenviable situation, was never forgotten. It not only impressed Sir Alexander, it made him lasting friends among the whole circle of British naval officers on the Malta station for the rest of his stay. He was accepted, in their tight-knit circle, as "a friend in need", who could be counted on. It was also noted among several American naval officers, temporarily stationed at Syracuse, among whom was the gallant Captain Stephen Decatur, famed for his recent exploit in blowing up the captured *Philadelphia* in Tripoli harbour (and later for his saying, "my country right or wrong").

Decatur became one of Coleridge's warmest admirers. Thus began a connection with Americans in the Mediterranean which had a lasting impact on his stay. Coleridge was back in Valletta on 8 November, and while in quarantine (for plague had been declared) completed his report, with nine documents annexed, for Sir Alexander. He concluded: "of course nothing further was to be done...and instead of going to Messina have returned to Malta, thinking, that I might be of some service perhaps to Captain Skinner in the explanation of the Business."⁹⁹

He returned to Sir Alexander's congratulations, and glorious autumn weather, the trees "loaded with Oranges" and his health "very greatly improved in this heavenly climate".¹⁰⁰ He was paid four months' back-salary of £100, and given a new set of rooms in the garrets of the Treasury building (now the Casino Maltese) with a decorated ceiling and huge windows "commanding a most magnificent view" of Valletta harbour. The ceiling depicted the Four Winds as baroque, curly-headed angels "spewing white smoke", and whirling around a mariner's compass in the middle.¹⁰¹ Coleridge would spend many hours in the coming months contemplating their navigational symbolism, and then gazing out over the sea with all its possible voyages.

11

The first of these was no less than a trip to Russia and the Black Sea. One of Sir Alexander's primary duties in the defence of Malta was to obtain corn supplies, and each spring he sent a special mission to purchase corn in Greece, Turkey and the Crimea. He now requested Coleridge to consider undertaking the 1805 mission, in company with a Captain Leake, departing in January for a round trip of three or four months. "The confidence placed in me by Sir A. Ball is unlimited...but it will be a most anxious business – as shall have the trust and management of 70, or 80 thousand pounds, while I shall not have for my toils & perils more than 3 or 4 hundred pounds, exclusive of all my expenses in travelling etc." For the moment he was undecided.¹⁰²

The Russian proposal finally forced Coleridge to turn to the question he had been avoiding for many months, not least at the bedside of Cecilia Bertozzi. What was he really doing in the Mediterranean? Did he intend to make a new life out there, to abandon once and for all the difficulties of his marriage, the affections of his children, the ambiguous dreams of happiness with Asra and the Wordsworths? Could he remake his career as a civil servant and diplomat, writing poetry and political reports, following Sir Alexander's wartime star, drawing an ever-increasing salary, and settling in some exotic country villa shrouded in orange and lemon groves, waited upon by servants and some dusky, voluptuous Italian muse? Could this be a rebirth, a second life; or an ultimate self-abandonment, with the alluring demon of opium ever at his side?

It is clear that the answer hung in the balance for many weeks in the winter of 1804–5, and was not fully resolved until the following summer. But now for the first time he faced it. In a long letter of 12 December to his wife Sara, he set out the position. His health was radically improved, his work for the government was valuable and well paid, he could guarantee her an allowance of £100 a year and a continuance of his life assurance policy in her favour, as well as the £150 Wedgwood annuity. "I remain faithful to you and to my own Honour in all things." He was "tranquil", though never happy – "no visitations of mind or of fancy" – and he agonized always over his children – "My children! – my children!" – sometimes in "a flood of tears". He had only agreed to consider the Russian mission "in fit of Despair, when Life was a burthen to me", and he would refuse it "on the whole, if I could get off with honour". Yet all the same, he might stay in the Mediterranean, in Malta or Sicily or Sardinia. He admitted this in a sudden burst of explanation and self-contradiction, which well expressed his divided feelings.

If I could make up my mind to stay here, or to follow Sir A.B. in case that circumstances & changes in the political world should lead him to Sardinia, no doubt, I might have about £500 a year, & live mainly at the Palace. But O God! O God! if that, Sara! which we both know too well, were not unalterably my Lot, how gladly would I prefer the mere necessaries of Life in England, & these obtained by daily Effort. But since my Health has been restored to me, I have felt more than ever how unalterable it is!¹⁰³

One wonders how Sara Coleridge would have understood this. Her wayward husband's "unalterable lot" could be taken as simply a reference to his opium addiction, which had been known to her ever since 1801. Or it could be a darker admission, of Coleridge's depression and unhappiness, his emotional incompatibility with her, and still obsessive love for Asra which made any true return and reunion impossible. Perhaps indeed the two elements were inextricably involved for him, and he was trying to get her to accept this. He concluded his letter with a formal assurance that "whatever & wherever I am" he would make it his "first anxiety and prominent Duty" to contribute to her happiness; and signed "most anxiously and affectionately, your Friend and more than Friend, S. T. Coleridge". But it could not have been a reassuring letter to receive.¹⁰⁴

Sitting up in his garret in the Treasury, gazing out at the "beautifully white sails of the Mediterranean (so carefully when in port put up into clean bags)", Coleridge considered the same problem in the privacy of his Notebooks. He felt the "Quietness, Security within & without in Malta".¹⁰⁵ He valued the regularity, the naval comradeship among the officers, the smooth sequence of time and command, "the rings of Russet smoke from the evening Gun, at Valletta".¹⁰⁶ He was working; he was content; he saw a possible future for himself.

But was he happy? In a long, calm, reflective entry he considered it. "Days & weeks & months

pass on; and now a year; and the sun, the Sea, the Breeze has its influences on me, and good and sensible men. – And I feel a pleasure upon me, & I am to the outward view of all cheerful, & have myself no distinct consciousness of the contrary; for I use my faculties, not indeed as once, yet freely – But oh [Asra]! I am never happy, – never deeply gladdened – I know not, I have forgotten what the Joy is of which the Heart is full as of a deep & quiet fountain overflowing insensibly; or the gladness of Joy, when the fountain overflows ebullient – STC.”¹⁰⁷

That absence, surely, was his unalterable lot; and for the moment he rested within it, waiting upon events. Through the long nights he read deeply, Thomas More on Utopia, Sir Thomas Browne on religion, Harrington on government. No letters reached him from England.¹⁰⁸

On 18 January 1805, the eighty-year-old Public Secretary of Malta, Mr Macauley, died in his sleep in a thunderstorm. Coleridge was immediately offered and accepted the post of Acting Public Secretary, the second in diplomatic rank to the Governor, with a salary of £600 a year. The Russian mission was put aside, and Coleridge agreed to remain with Sir Alexander in Malta for the next three months or until the arrival of the new Public Secretary, Mr Chapman, on the springtime convoys in March or April. The post was distinguished but laborious, requiring regular work in Sir Alexander’s cabinet, the drafting of a steady stream of *bandi* or civil decrees, and attendance in the law courts.¹⁰⁹

Coleridge was pleased, for though it curtailed the opportunities for further travel and writing, it would sort out his finances, and give him valuable experience of public affairs. It also put off the problematic question of his return from the Mediterranean. He wrote cheerfully to Southey, who had become in effect the guardian of his children at Greta Hall: “I am and some 50 times a day subscribe myself, Segretario Publico dell’Isole di Malta, Gozo, e delle loro dipendenze. I live in a perfect Palace, & have all my meals with the Governor; but my profits will be much less, than if I had employed my time & efforts in my own literary pursuits. However, I gain new Insights; & if (as I doubt not, I shall) I return, having expended nothing, having paid all my prior debts...with Health, & some additional knowledge in Things & Languages, I shall surely not have lost a year.”¹¹⁰

But as he settled into his work, letters did begin to reach him from England, and the news that they brought was bad and began to throw his plans into disarray. First was the rumour that Mr Jackson, the landlord of Greta Hall, was considering selling the house in his absence, leaving his family and Southey’s without a home. Second was the bitter intelligence that his friend Major Adye had died of plague in Gibraltar and all his effects were burnt by quarantine officers. Thus one by one, most of Coleridge’s literary papers of the previous year had been destroyed. He had lost the entire travel journal for Beaumont, the letter to Wordsworth on “The Recluse”, an extended political essay for Stuart, and several long family letters. All back-up copies of these had also been lost from the frigates *Arrow* and *Acheron*, thrown overboard according to navy regulations during pursuit by French privateers.¹¹¹

Thus almost all his literary work in the first year at Malta (except for the four strategic papers) had been useless. Among them, incidentally, must have been the missing account of climbing Mount Etna. Later he felt that he was being “punished” for all his previous neglect, by “writing industriously to no purpose” for months on end. “No one not absent on a dreary Island so many leagues of sea from England can conceive the effect of these Accidents on the Spirits & inmost Soul. So help me Heaven they have nearly broken my Heart.”¹¹²

So more and more Coleridge turned now to his Notebooks. They are extraordinarily rich for the winter and spring of 1804–5, despite the daily pressures of his duties as Public Secretary. While there are only six letters home between January and August 1805, there are over 300 Notebook entries for

similar period, amounting to several hundred manuscript pages, mainly in four leather or metalclasp pocket-books, much worn from carrying.¹¹³ Coleridge recorded his external life, visits to hospitals, workhouses, the theatre, and his regular talks with Sir Alexander about government, diplomacy and warfare. Even more vividly he recorded his inner life: dreams, psychological analysis, theories of perception, religious beliefs, superb visions of the Mediterranean landscape and skyscape, and long disquisitions on opium-taking and sexual fantasies.

Coleridge turned to these Notebooks in Malta, as consciously as he had done during the dark winters of the Lake District, as witnesses to his trials for the after times. “If I should perish without having the power of destroying these & my other pocket books, the history of my own mind for my own improvements: O friend! Truth! Truth! but yet Charity! Charity! I have never loved evil for its own sake; no! nor ever sought pleasure for its own sake, but only as the means of escaping from pain that coiled round my mental powers, as a serpent around the body & wings of an Eagle.”¹¹⁴

12

Coleridge was in a lively mood throughout the Christmas of 1804, planning to write “300 volumes”, allowing ten years for each. “You have ample Time, my dear fellow!...you can’t think of living less than 4,000 years, & that would nearly suffice for your present schemes.”¹¹⁵

He analysed his talkativeness as producing a “great Blaze of colours” that dazzled bystanders by containing too many ideas in two few words. “My illustrations swallow up my thesis – I feel too intensely the omnipresence of all in each, platonically speaking.” His brain-fibres glittered with “spiritual Light” like the phosphorescence “in sundry rotten mackerel!” Once started on a subject he went on and on, “from circle to circle till I break against the shore of my Hearer’s patience, or have any Concentricals dashed to nothing by a Snore”.

Yet at Malta he had tried to restrain himself and had earned, he believed, “the general character of being a quiet well-meaning man, rather dull indeed – & who would have thought, that he had been *Poet* ‘O a very wretched Poetaster, Ma’am’”.¹¹⁶

If by day Coleridge gave the impression of a busy, punctilious bureaucrat, bustling between the Treasury, the palace and the Admiralty Court (where he argued cases in a wig and gown), dining cheerfully with the Governor and gossiping with senior clerks like Mr Underwood in the corridors, his night life was another existence altogether. It was solitary, introspective, and often intoxicated. On 2 December he started using cipher in his Notebooks, and entered bleakly: “No night without its guilt of opium and spirits.”¹¹⁷

After his autumn débâcle with Cecilia Bertozzi, he was much preoccupied with sexual matters. He dwelt on the link between mental and physical arousal, the sexual stimulation of dreams, the different sense of “Touch” in lips and fingers, and operations of “the mem(brum) virile in acts of (Es)sex”. He brilliantly intuited a whole modern theory of “erogenous zones” existing outside the genital area, which respond to sexual excitement. “Observe that in certain excited states of feeling the knees, ankle, side & soles of the feet, become organic. Query – the nipple in a woman’s breast, does that ever become the seat of a particular feeling, as one would guess by its dormancy & sudden awakings.”¹¹⁸ Most strikingly, he linked sexual confidence and fulfilment with more general feelings of well-being and spiritual optimism in life:

“Important metaphysical Hint: the influence of bodily vigour and strong Grasp of Touch facilitating the passion of Hope: eunuchs – in all degrees even to the full ensheathment and the both a

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