2 Kindling the Torch

... the Writer wishes, in the following Essays, to convey not instruction merely, but fundamental instruction; not so much to show my Reader this or that fact, as to kindle his own torch for him, and leave it to himself to choose the particular objects, which he might wish to examine by its light... The primary facts essential to the intelligibility of my principles I can prove to others only as far as I can prevail on them to retire into themselves and make their own minds the objects of their steadfast attention.

Coleridge, The Friend

In the discussion which follows, I shall inevitably find myself trying to pitch the argument back to an anterior point, one where the search for meaning and selfhood seems to promise some success. This anteriority is a sort of fiction in itself, and I do not mean to imply a fixed historical development. Most of the poems to be discussed were written before 1820, but many of them seem to come down to the same convoluted paradigm, the same compulsory sojourn. Rather, it is a descriptive moment, an attempt to hold off the conclusion in order to build up a context and to show the range of options it offers; but at the same time we shall find ourselves constantly laying and unlaying the same bricks, in a process marked by repetition rather than clearly defined progress.

The first mechanism to be considered is the deconstruction of habitual consciousness; a clearing of the ground, a creation of empty space which might potentially be filled with something of greater integrity than what is displaced. But this is necessarily going to bring up, at this very moment, the question of the nature of the reoccupation, which often involves the same slippage and the same corrective gestures, repeated over and over again. Only in the consciousness of this persisting paradox can interpretation proceed without destroying itself before the shrine of a projected objectivity.

The range of options, the making of choices, is embodied in a series...
of strategies which I shall refer to collectively as ‘the heuristic method’. The phrase paraphrases almost perfectly: serving to or encouraging the desire to discover, through a process of trial and error, or selection and substitution; the playing of past assumptions (habitual experience) against new limits of meaning; forcing the pupil (reader) to use the given materials in the service of self-discovery; the method used in making decisions when the supply of information is limited, when all the possibilities cannot be fully explored (how well this suits the theory of mind wherein what is most important is most indescribable).  

The emphasis upon self-finding and self-creation, with the consequent disestablishment of the text as an authority and the stressing of its function as a heuristic stimulus, occurs all over Romantic aesthetics. The ideal reader, for Wordsworth, would ‘decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgement of others’. He will not look to predetermined standards of competence and normalcy, but to his own creative response. The task of the poet then becomes one of arousing the ‘co-operating power in the mind of the Reader’ (Prose, III, 81), which will involve stimulating the reflexive activity in which ‘each man is a memory to himself’. This alone can redeem a discourse which, despite Wordsworth’s persistent and notorious assertions of a kind of clarity, must remain difficult and even insignificant, appealing to ‘few and scattered hearers’ (ibid., 83), and must fail to register at all among those who ‘do not read books’ but ‘merely snatch a glance at them that they may talk about them’. For Wordsworth, then, the reader must meet the poet half way, to the same degree that the poet himself must engage with nature. What is, as we shall see, the source of an indeterminate epistemological relationship between the poet and the world, becomes an aesthetical prerequisite in the relationship of the poem to the reader.

Few writers have explored the mechanisms of indirect communication more deeply than Coleridge, and we are perhaps only just beginning to provide the context within which his notoriously ‘fragmentary’ output can be seen to be connected by definite methodological principles. The presentation of the fragment, the artifact or argument which is in some sense deliberately incomplete, can be seen as one way of providing a reader with the materials of self-construction. If meaning is to appear, we have to become what we behold; ‘we must be it in order to know it’. Quoting Plotinus, Coleridge says: