Part II: The Self and the Receding Landscape

CHAPTER 1 THE DIVIDED PATH

Looking through Coleridge's later notebooks, we seldom come across descriptions of landscape, and of those which crop up sporadically in the midst of biblical exegesis, few, if any, display the exuberance and variety of visual detail of his earlier travel journals. The late tour of the Netherlands with Dora and William Wordsworth appears to have revived Coleridge's passion for picturesque views, but the landscape notes he took during this tour are so sketchy and uninteresting compared to earlier descriptions that, by contrast, they suggest the decline of what had once been a more promising activity. What is more significant and directly related to the scarcity of descriptive material, is that on those rare occasions when Coleridge is moved by a particular scene, he seems uncomfortable dwelling at length on the appearance of natural forms. An unpublished entry in the Folio notebook dated 7 August 1826 indicates that, while in his later years Coleridge may still respond deeply to a landscape, he becomes increasingly reluctant to abandon himself to the contemplation of sensory objects.

The entry begins with the commemoration of a natural event, a beautiful sunset, that offers one more pleasurable evening in a 'wonderful' six-month season. And yet, although Coleridge admits that he is impressed by what he sees around him, he does not immediately linger over the objects which, presumably, he finds so 'overwhelming'. Instead, he is troubled by a more serious question—namely, whether a man caught in 'a sensual trance' would 'attach any practical lively meaning to the Gospel Designation of a Christian as living a life of Faith, in the present state' and the belief in 'another world to come'. The only mention we get of the scenery viewed by Coleridge appears inadvertently in the middle of the entry and is limited to a few lines. As Coleridge muses on the conflict between a life of sensuous gratification and 'a life of
Faith’, his eyes accidentally fall on ‘the lovely Lace-work of those fair Elm-trees, so richly so softly black . . . and the deep red clouds & Light of the Horizon, with their interstices of twilight air made visible’. Coleridge quickly pulls himself away from the attractive landscape and gears his excitement towards the elaboration of his newly acquired insight into the spiritual nature of ‘the intuition of the Beautiful’ which he defines, along with Schelling, as ‘a silent communion of the Spirit with the Spirit in Nature not without consciousness, tho’ with the Consciousness not successively unfolded’.

Why, say, by 1826, does Coleridge not look at a landscape with an easy conscience and why does he feel compelled to postpone, deflect and minimize his direct experience of natural objects? To answer this question we must attempt to identify in Coleridge’s fragmented and extremely diversified writings those texts most relevant to his conception of nature, paying special attention to the dilemmas that prevented Coleridge from settling into any one secure attitude towards nature. In the following discussion I want to examine a number of factors that contributed to Coleridge’s changing relationship with nature, ranging from intellectual to personal concerns and including such diverse problems as his conception of symbolism and his sexual reticence towards women.

In reviewing Coleridge’s attitudes towards nature, we continually receive diverse, if not contradictory impressions. This is so whether we examine individual passages or, more broadly, a collective record over a given period of time. Thus, on the one hand, one finds in Coleridge’s work a substantial number of instances where he appears as a sworn devotee of nature, as passionately moved by ‘the speaking face’ of this universe as Wordsworth is in his most exalted moods. Undoubtedly, Coleridge believed that nature was an invaluable reservoir of material for poetry and that unless a ‘Poet’s Heart & Intellect’ were ‘intimately combined & unified, with the great appearances in Nature’, he would be confined to exercise his fancy at the expense of the imagination and produce artificial works of the kind written by William Lisle Bowles (CL, II, 864). He remarked that Shakespeare’s supreme excellence as a dramatic poet was due in part to his ‘affectionate Love of Nature & Natural Objects, without which no man could have observed so steadily, or painted so truly & passionately the . . . beauties of the external world’ (CN, III, 3290). In his own poems, Coleridge explored the possibilities of imaginative experience and self-fulfilment within the realm of the natural world, and when his ‘genial powers’ began to flag, he frequently sought in nature a source for their replenishment. Finally,