CHAPTER XII

THE ROCK AND THE LAST POEMS : REALITY AS BEING

The last poems of Stevens are hymns "of mere being" (OP, 117), of the revelation or "knowledge" (CP, 534) of reality that is "at the end of the mind" (OP, 117), beyond the limits of the mind. They are spoken by a man who is on the threshold, who, as he leaves the room (OP, 116), as he leaves the world, turns, in his essential poverty, in his "naked majesty" (OP, 510), in his ultimately decreated state, with awe and wonder, to the "appreciation" (OP, 117) of the real "as if" he "left / With something I could touch, touch every way." (OP, 117). Stevens' poetry, in this last phase, arrives finally at an experience of the being, the mystery of reality which the self can never completely tackle on its own terms. Reality in this sense, is "foreign" (OP, 117) and alien because it cannot be reduced and dissolved into the conceptions of the mind. The function of poetry is to mediate for us this reality which is not of our making, to discover and preserve its essential mystery.

"The Rock" (CP, 525-528), the poem which gives its name to

the final section of the Collected Poems, perhaps best illustrates the experience that lies behind these poems: the decreation or destruction of the "illusion" of the mind that covers the essential mystery of the rock, the primordial reality and the power of poetry to bring that reality into being in its concrete, individual manifestations and thus make it truly habitable for us. The rock is a major image in Stevens' poetry and Stevens consistently uses it to represent reality that is essentially impenetrable, and mysterious, that does not give up its meaning totally to human mind. "The rock cannot be broken" (CP, 375), it cannot be divided into the physical and the metaphysical, the visible and the invisible. It cannot, in other words, be had in the idealistic, abstract conceptions of the self. It preserves its essential mystery by manifesting itself in all that appears on it. Critics have variously interpreted the image. For Frank Doggett the rock "is the content of the mind, the object that is nothing without the subject, that, by its inclusion in the mind or subject, becomes the unity of the world."[1] But the rock is "the habitation of the whole" (CP, 528), it is the ultimate horizon within which human life and other things are brought into being. Riddel gives a more comprehensive definition: "The rock is that in which man must dwell, the inclusive world of thing and idea which harbors the self, and paradoxically, which the self harbors."[2] J. Hillis Miller, in his deconstructionist reading of "The Rock" finds in the poem a "baffling interchange between

proper and improper uses of language, in a bewildering multiplication of different chain of figurative terminology superimposed, juxtaposed, interwoven (in) a final form of mise en abyme."[3] Miller accordingly, sees the poem as an endless schema which both opens up the abyss, creates it or reveals it, and at the same time fills it up, covers it over by naming it. It is true, as Miller observes, that "the vocabulary of a poet is not a gathering or a closed system,"[4] but just for that reason, it is not a dissemination either. Indeed, Stevens' use of the rock has shown that it cannot be fixed into any single image or idea. But this does not necessarily lead to an aporia. Rather, it emphasizes the essential mystery of it which can never be had in human conceptions but which must be recovered and preserved intact.

The first section of "The Rock," "Seventy Years Later," is about the bleak recognition by a seventy year old man of a life lived in illusion, a life lived in the forgetfulness of the rock. Living in the houses of the mothers, the sounds of guitar that filled the ear, the blooming of the lilacs that filled the eyes, are all an illusion because they spring from the desire to cover the rock, hide the "nothingness" (CP, 526) at the base. The first four stanzas of the section involve an emphatic act of rejection of "illusion." In a tone of finality they record an act of destruction or decreation of all illusions that make us forget the ground, "The strength at the centre"

(CP, 477), the base and the element, the solid rock which is our habitation:

> The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.
> They never were ... The sounds of the guitar
>
> Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken
> Were not and are not. It is not to be believed.
> The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like
>
> An invention.... (CP, 525)

The old man of seventy has not only forgotten the illusions of the past but he is gripped with the bleak recognition that they were nothing but illusions. The sounds of the guitar did not exist because they were not grounded in anything; they were and are "absurd," baseless, groundless. The first section, then, focuses on the total rejection of everything that is baseless, everything that is not grounded in reality. It is seen as an illusion because, instead of making the ground manifest itself, it covers it and hides it. It is as if the "nothingness," the "permanent cold" at the base, the barrenness of the rock itself contains a "metier," a "vital assumption" (CP, 526) a desire for illusion that the leaves come and cover the high rock, the lilacs bloom cleansing "blindness," bringing sight again. But the perception of leaves and lilacs, ironically, is a cleansing of a "blindness," a blindness that is not able to perceive the base itself and can only be cleansed by the sight of lilacs and leaves that hide the base.

The cure of the ground suggested at the beginning of the

second section, "The poem as icon," is a "cure beyond forgetfulness," for "it is not enough to cover the rock with leaves" (CP, 526). The cure of the ground would be, then, in the first place, a clearing, a cleansing of all illusions, all coverings, so that the ground stands revealed. This would be the cure beyond forgetfulness for when the covering that hides the ground and makes us forget it would be removed and the ground would no longer be forgotten, but would be, truly disclosed. "The cure" would also be, in Heidegger's term, a 'caring' for it, a concernful belonging to it. Moreover, the cure of the ground would be a cure of ourselves because we would be purged of our blindness, our absurdity, and illusions, and would learn to perceive the ground as it essentially is.

The cure of the ground suggested in the poem is the poem itself, the "poem as icon":

> the poem makes meaning of the rock,
> Of such mixed motion and such imagery
> That its barrenness becomes a thousand things
>
> And so exists no more. This is the cure
> Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves.
> His words are both the icon and the man. (CP, 527)

The rock is, then, the primordial reality, the mysterious earth, which is essentially impenetrable and self-enclosed, but which appropriates itself by letting the leaves, etc., manifest their being, by letting things stand unconcealed. It is the ultimate horizon, the ground upon which and within which things

appear and grow: the leaves "bud and bloom" (CP, 527), they "bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love" (CP, 527); men find their environment, "habitation" (CP, 528), a dwelling place. Poetry is thus making a meaning of the rock, for it is an act of revelation of something that is hidden, but comes forth into unhiddenness, the mystery that hides itself in showing all that is to be shown, the barrenness of the rock becoming leaves and fruit and the world and its seasons and man dwelling, in short, becoming "a thousand things" (CP, 527) and therefore existing no more. The poem is an icon, both as an image of things and as a figure, a making, a creating that names the mystery that conceals itself and yet is revealed in appropriating itself in beings of the world, and thus mutually belonging with them.

What Stevens is saying here has a striking and significant affinity with Heidegger's views on nature and function of poetry. In "The Origin of a Work of Art" Heidegger speaks of the "setting up of a world and a setting forth the earth[5] as the essential condition of a work of art. Heidegger describes earth as that to which everything that rises from it falls back as such; its essence is to endure within the rising openness as the enclosing ground. The earth is what closes in upon itself, what comes to closure within the context of the opening world: "Earth juts through the world and world grounds itself on the earth only so far as truth happens as the primal conflict between clearing and concealing."[6]

Heidegger uses "earth" in the sense of the Greek "physis," not in the Aristotelian sense, but in the original sense of "physis" as being, that appropriates itself, comes into its own in its mutual belonging with beings. Stevens also seems to refer to reality in this ultimate sense, as "the unapproachable," "the strength at the centre" (CP, 477), the mysterious and/"foreign" (OP, 117) that is essentially impenetrable. Poetry, both for Stevens and Heidegger, is the saying which lets being show itself in beings, which lets the rock become a thousand things. The rock that is essentially hidden reveals itself only in the world it sets up. In finding himself a habitation upon and within the earth, man lives in mutual belonging with it and thus 'dwells poetically on earth'. This is how he attains the final "blessedness" (CP, 526), when his poem becomes an "icon" (the word has religious overtones), that is, in creating it reveals beings in their being.

The rock, then, in the final section, "Forms of the rock in a Night - Hymn," is described as the ultimate ground to which the rise of everything rising falls back as such: "The rock is the gray particular of man's life, / The stone from which he rises, up-and-ho, / The step to the bleaker depth of his descents ..." (CP, 528). It is the earth from which man is born and to which he returns in the end. As such it forms the horizon of man's existence. In rising from the earth, he finds his word opening up a world in which he dwells. The rock is thus "the habitation of the whole, / Its strength and measure." It is the rock "where

tranquil must adduce / Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind, / The starting point of the human and the end, / That in which space itself is contained" (CP, 528).

The rock, which is essentially impenetrable, can be known by finding a habitation, a world upon it, thus mutually belonging with it. It can never be known as the mere bulk of its parts or fragments; nor can it be known in our "illusion," our imagined representations of it. In his last poems Stevens reiterates the need to destroy or decreate all our inherited conceptions of reality, all our attempts to dominate and devour it within the conceptions of the arrogant mind. The decreated self claims no superiority over reality. It is not the centre of all existents, "The proud and the strong" (CP, 504), but as a self that 'cares' for the ground - for the ground's "cure" is its caring - it appears in its essential 'poverty,' a self that is not the superior master of beings, but, as Heidegger would say, the shepherd of being. The supreme image of such a self is that of Santayana, living in poverty in a convent in Rome. The poverty of Santayana and poverty in other poems is not then an image of depletion of body or mind, but of the self that stands in its "naked majesty" (CP, 510), in its humility so that it is able to live in the nearness of being.

"To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (CP, 508-511) is a

profound invocation to this supreme self, the self of Santayana, who dwells in the vicinity of the actual, the poor, the familiar, "the bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns, / The candles" and in such dwelling, in this "veritable small," finds the abode of "the illumined large," the "celestial possible." He lives thus "in two worlds," finding grandeur

> Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
> Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead,
> As in the last drop of the deepest blood,
> As it falls from the heart and lies there to be seen,
>
> Even as the blood of an empire, it might be,
> For a citizen of heaven though still of Rome.
> It is poverty's speech that seeks us out most.
> (CP, 509-510)

Santayana lives in two worlds, in a convent in Rome, and in "that more merciful Rome / Beyond" (CP, 508), in the proximity of the actual and familiar things and also in the presence of the celestial possible, the being, "The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme / Of the unknown" (CP, 508). The known and the unknown, the "veritable small" and the "illumined large" (CP, 509) are one for Santayana, "the two alike in the make of the mind. / It is as if in a human dignity / Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which / Men are part both in an inch and in the mile" (CP, 508). Santayana's dwelling is 'dwelling poetically on earth' for it is discovering the unknown in its mutual belonging with the known:

> It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
> With every visible thing enlarged and yet
> No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
> The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,
> The book and candle in your ambered room,
>
> Total grandeur of a total edifice. (CP, 510)

The poems in The Rock and the last poems in Opus Posthumous are an affirmation and celebration of the decreated self, the self that is "Free from everything else, free above all from thought" (OP, 107), the self that is finally rid of the egocentric anthropomorphic imagination. This is the self which is "the spirit's base" (CP, 501), which goes back to the origin "before thought, before speech / At the head of the past" (CP, 501). Its stance is not one of arrogant supremacy over things but one of acquiescence and awe in the presence of being. If humility, in its naked poverty, is one virtue of this self, then wonder and exhilaration in the perception of the real are its most genuine experience, suggested in the image of the child in a late poem, "A Discovery of Thought" (OP, 95-96). The "antipodal" self hears not the irrelevant, fanciful tales of bearded deities in winter, but "The true tone of the metal of winter in what it says" (OP, 96):

> At the antipodes of poetry, dark winter,
> When the trees glitter with that which despoils them,
> Daylight evaporates, like a sound one hears in
> sickness

> One is a child again. The gold beards of waterfalls
> Are dissolved as in an infancy of blue snow. (OP, 95)

In an earlier poem, "Questions Are Remarks" (CP, 462) Stevens had presented a child who did not desire to reduce reality to concepts by improper anthropomorphic approaches, like "Who are you," (or, - Why are you?) as the "drowsy, infant old men do," but who desired to know it directly by asking "What is that?" (CP, 462). In this poem also the self is reborn as a child, and discovers that

> when the houses of New England catch the first sun,
> The first word would be of the susceptible being arrived,
> The immaculate disclosure of the secret no more
> obscured. (OP, 95-96)

This is a "new life" of winter, its "coming on and coming forth" (CP, 487). It is an "event of life" (OP, 96) an occurring, an arrival of being into existence, an "immaculate disclosure of the secret" perceived clearly in the glittering houses of New England.

It is to a "Plain Sense of things" (CP, 502-503) that the self ultimately returns, to a reality that is divested of all subjective images and ideas. What it desires is "Not the Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" (CP, 534). The scrawny cry from outside seems "like a sound in his mind" to the listener because he is totally attuned to it, it is like a

"happening / In space and the self that touched them both at once / And alike" (CP, 483). But the cry is not a human cry, it has no origin in the mind, nor does the mind hear its own meaning in the cry: "It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-mache... / The sun was coming from outside." It is an experience of the cry as it is, a revelation of the thing itself, a new knowledge of reality:

> That scrawny cry - it was
> A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
> It was part of the colossal sun,
>
> Surrounded by its choral rings,
> Still far away. It was like
> A new knowledge of reality.

The poem, and with it the Collected Poems, closes with the most potent image of the sun which has been the presiding image in Stevens' poetry, the image of the mystery of the visible, which is both a thing present and the radiant presence of the thing. It is in the revelation of this reality that Stevens' poetry finds its most fulfilling end.

Another late poem "The Course of a Particular" (OP, 96-97) is also about the cry, the cry of the leaves. Their cry is not reminiscent of some transcendent origin, of "divine attention" nor is it a "human cry." The self does not intervene nor does it intrude upon the scene. "Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind, / ...One holds off and merely hears the cry." And in this cry "One feels the life of that which gives life as it is":

> The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
> Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
> It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves.
>
> In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
> Than they are in the final finding of the air, in
> the thing
> Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one
> at all. (OP, 96-97, Emphasis added)

The ultimate act of poetry, or imagination, then, is the discovery of "the thing itself," a revelation of reality which is not the making of our mind. Stevens' familiar image for the imagination is the "flick" (CP, 517), the light that adds nothing but itself. The supreme image of "candle" which has been with Stevens since his very early poems in Harmonium, "Valley Candle" (CP, 51) for instance, appears in one of the most meditative last poems, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (CP, 524) as the "highest candle." In our final poverty / "final" is an oft-repeated word in the last poems - we are "finally human" (CP, 504); reality is the "final found" (CP, 527) both as discovery and creation, of poetry in "The Rock"; the leaves are in "the final finding of the air" (OP, 97) in "The Course of a Particular."/ we have the immense and intense need of poetry, for it, in revealing things as they are, gives us a world in which we make our dwelling in mutually belonging together with beings in their being, and feel the warmth of it. Poetry, in this final act, fulfils the need that religion, or God does. It is like

> a single shawl
> Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
> A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

> Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
> We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
> A knowledge.....
>
> We say God and the imagination are one...
> How high that highest candle lights the dark.
>
> Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
> We make a dwelling in the evening air,
> In which being there together is enough. (CP, 524)

The revelation of "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination" (OP, 110-111) as the poem of that title illustrates. The poem describes a drive home from Cornwall to Hartford, late one Friday night, when suddenly in the "big light" of the night the poet feels "a crush of strength... / The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins, / As things emerged amd moved and were dissolved... / The visible transformations of summer night...." Imagination is here described as a noble and august force, a glowing in the self, as it discovers and experiences in the changing forms of the night, "An argentine abstraction approaching form / And suddenly denying itself away." As the car moves through the fields in the night, the things emerge into visible shapes, move forward and then dissolve in distance or darkness, and in these particular, visible, changing shapes, the abstraction is seen appearing as "form" like the rock breaking into leaves and buds, into a thousand things. In the surge of emerging and dissolving shapes the "solid" seems its "insolid" self, and the abstraction manifests itself in visible forms. Reality is thus discovered as the belonging together of solid and insolid, be-ing and being.

The last poems of Stevens attain a sense of vibrant serenity and fulfilment as they finally turn to the real that is finally cleansed of all subjective, human meanings we give it and, therefore, discovered and preserved in its essential mystery. These poems focus firmly on the real that is "here" and "now" (CP, 524, OP, 117) "today" (OP, 96), or "last Friday" (OP, 110), in the "room" (CP, 523,524, OP, 111). In one of his very last poems, "As You Leave the Room" (OP, 116-117), Stevens speaks of his own experience of having lived, as he is about to "leave" the room, leave the world, in the "appreciation" of the real. The poem is a revision of an earlier poem "First Warmth" (OP, 89-90), and it changes the lyrical subjective voice of the previous version into a more impersonal dramatic speech of "you." Yet the poem remains a most personal and moving account, a final manifesto, of Stevens' life as poet and man. The poet takes stock of the entire poetic life, the poems he wrote about the pineapple, the mind, the credible hero, summer, and comes to the conclusion that they are the creations not of a "skeleton" but of a man who has "lived" on earth with a profound belief in reality. "Now" as he is about to leave the room, the world, he finds "here" in "the snow" an elevated experience of the real, as if he were leaving with a bit of snow in his hand:

Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes

Part of a major reality, part of
An appreciation of a reality

And thus an elevation, as if I left
With something I could touch, touch every way. (OP, 90)

Far from being a poem about death and parting, this and other last poems, are the most moving expressions of the ultimate fulfilment found in the revelation and experience of the mystery that is reality. These poems are the celebrations of such revelations and experiences. One of them is "The River of River in Connecticut" whose

mere flowing of the water is a gayety,
Flashing and flashing in the sun. ....
. . . . . .
It is not to be seen beneath the appearances
That tell of it. The steeple at Farmington
Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways.

It is the third commonness with light and air,
A carriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction... (CP, 533)

The river is this side of Stygia, this side of oblivion. It is the vital, flowing reality. The steeple at Farmington stands glistening on its bank, and Haddam shines and sways in its water. Like the rock that reveals itself in the leaves and the buds and the seasons and the world it gives rise to and is "the habitation of the whole" (CP, 528), the river is a "local abstraction," a being that exists in beings; on its banks worlds grow, with the seasons reflected in its waters, with the "folk-lore" of man, the poems of the indigenous soil celebrating the world. Again, like

the rock it contains all space, it is "space-filled" (CP, 533). It is the "unnamed" (CP, 533) like the impenetrable rock, the being that manifests itself in beings that it sustains. As such, it is an element, a "third commonness with light and air."

"Of Mere Being" (OP, 117-118), a very late poem, is a supreme hymn to the mystery of the real that is untouched and unimpaired by the human mind:

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze distance,
>
> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song.
>
> You know then that it is not the reason
> That makes us happy or unhappy.
> The bird sings. Its feathers shine.
>
> The palm stands at the edge of space.
> The wind moves slowly in the branches.
> The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

The bird's song, like the "scrawny cry" (CP, 534) of the bird or the cry of the leaves (OP, 97) is not a human song. It occurs "at the end of the mind," "beyond the last thought," the human mind cannot, or rather need not, give meaning to it. It is the song of a bird, distinct and "foreign," mysterious not familiar as the mind's projections appear to make it. It is something wholly other, that exists independently of the mind's conceptions of it. The first two stanzas establish the separate identity of the bird from the mind.

It is not then the mind that is the origin of our joy and sorrow, not the mind that thinks it can make meaning of things and project its feelings onto them. Rather our joy and sorrow have their origin in our ability to "appreciate" (OP, 117) or experience the "mere being" of the bird, to celebrate the inscrutable mystery of its existence: "The bird sings. Its feathers shine." Stevens has not written shorter sentences than these two, in a single line, to convey the sense of "mere being," of the infinite strangeness of the sheer fact of existence. The poem closes with an experience of awe and wonder at the mysterious manifestation of the bird's being - the bird singing, in the expanse of space, the wind moving through the branches of the palm and the dazzling feathers of the bird dangling in the wind.