

would have been overwhelmed by the simplest sensory contact with reality, would have taken intense pleasure in the most rudimentary sensation of it, as if this sensuous contact were the essence of life. The poet reads from his "purple" books ("purple": a deep blue, therefore deeply imaginative, also, perhaps, a blend of the reader's vivid life with his imagination) a description of existence and its articulations in poetry ("The outlines of being and its expressings"), whose syllables are its "law," in that by giving us the literal content of reality in its inspired ("vatic") lines, poetry enables us to realize reality in terms of feeling, brings us to reality through its feeling for it, as it brings the ghosts to life.

"This Solitude of Cataracts" (*CP*, p. 424)

His feelings about existence, the "flecked river" (flecked with the details of reality), existed in a continuum of change, as existence itself was a continuum of change (flowing "never the same way twice"). The river, since it is that of existence itself, flows everywhere at once, and therefore seems to stand still (compare "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," *CP*, p. 533: "The river that flows nowhere, like a sea"; also, "Metaphor as Degeneration," *CP*, p. 444.) Its surface manifests the details of reality which appear in it randomly, without order or set purpose, like wild ducks "Ruffling" the surface of a lake. These random details of reality disturb our projections of existence which are mirrored in it, our imaginings, our thoughts, and which, therefore, are "its common reflections" (the mirrorings of the New Hampshire mountain, Monadnock, in the lake, are like thoughts, "reflections"—see *LWS*, p. 823). There seems to be an unspoken apostrophe inherent in the concept of reality represented by this lacustrine scene, and which is articulated by what follows. So much of this already fluid existence consists of our "reflections" on it, so much is imaginary ("not real at all"),

that it seems doubly insubstantial. This provokes a desire for the opposite. He wanted the river to flow not in a continuum of change ("never the same way twice," l. 2), but in "the same way," and to keep on flowing in that one way. He wanted the scene to be static, the moon, unchanging, nailed in one place, as he walked under the buttonwoods (one imagines them, in this context, buttoned in place). He wanted to become static himself "In a permanent realization" of himself and of a reality in which there would not be any random detail like that of the wild ducks, in which there would not be any imaginary projections that, though unreal, are part of reality. He wanted to get the sense of a permanent reality, in which one would be released from the continual destruction of impermanence and, by implication, released from death as well. He would then be like a monument, indestructible, in an ambiance of unchanging stone ("lapis"), "archaic" because it has never changed, beyond the fluctuations of the planetary cycles ("pass-pass," also with the implication that such phenomena are illusory, unreal, from the French "passe-passe," prestidigitation—compare *LWS*, p. 823). He would then be non-human, breathing a "bronzon breath" at the "azury"—both heavenly and, by association with Stevens' use of blue as the color of the imagination, imagined—"centre of time," the hub of the wheel, the still point of time where time does not pass.

"Saint John and the Back-Ache" (*CP*, p. 436)

The poem is cast in the form of a dialogue which represents Saint John's reaction to the presence of a pain in his back. The mind is the most potent force in the world, because it alone can defend us against the difficulties of consciousness which it contains. This is suggested to Saint John by the Back-Ache because, in his consciousness of it, his first thought is that its pain is something that can be resolved in

the mind. But then it occurs to him that the world does not consist of a force, but of the presence of reality, and that the presence of reality is not of the mind. The Back-Ache replies that presence is trivial, a child's play ("*Kinder-Scenen*," children's scenes). Saint John objects that presence, "The effect of the object," "fills the being" before the mind can grasp it, that this effect is beyond the mind's furthest reach ("Extremest pinch") to achieve, as in the effect of a sudden appearance of color on the sea; yet presence is not that color in itself. Again, presence is beyond the mind as is the somber change of season from summer to autumn, but it is not the undoing of the last yellow leaves of late summer in itself, nor is it the woman in herself who provokes the profoundly moving experience of love at first sight. Presence is not the object but "The effect of the object" (l. 9). He notes that he is not quite articulating his point ("I speak below/ The tension of the lyre"), and goes on to do so. These illustrations of presence are nothing miraculous, but real, even ordinary, phenomena which, because they affect us deeply, because their presence is deeply felt, help us bridge the "dumbfounding abyss" between ourselves and those objects in external reality which are the cause of such feeling. In bridging this abyss between the self and reality, the mind does not help us, it has no dominion; therefore the abyss is an "ignorance," one which, however small, serves to alienate the self from the world in which it exists. Such examples of presence suggest the hypothetical proposition ("possible," "invisible," "composite") of a time when we will recognize that the venom of reality is also its wisdom, when we will understand that what inflicts pain and kills is also that reality whose presence we most profoundly need to realize. Thus in opening ourselves fully to the presence of reality, the armor of the "stale turtle" against reality will grow useless. Such knowledge would be an insight of great weight. The Back-Ache admits the possibility of this argument, since he cannot know the irrational human reaction to presence, such as that of Saint John's reaction, in its reasoned irrationality, to the pain of his own presence.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (CP, p. 465)

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is written in that kind of free verse approximating a norm of iambic pentameter, which was Stevens' characteristic measure in his later poems. A summary of the poem would be of small help, since there is no argument to the poem, nor progression of any kind. Its form is rather that of a see-saw oscillation between an attitude that everything is "as unreal as real can be" (V), and its counterpart that "We keep coming back and coming back/ To the real" (IX). This oscillation in the attitude of the poem reflects the actual oscillation, as it is described by the poem, of the mind with regard to reality. The poem is a series of qualifications on the "vulgate of experience" (I), the common, received version of experience, as opposed to the fluctuations of experience in the individual and imaginative mind. The fundamental assumption of the poem is that the locus of reality, insofar as it is manifest to the mind, is a realm where it and the mind meet and interfuse one another, with a result that is sometimes in favor of the one, sometimes the other. In this realm the two balance each other, so that sometimes we use the imagination to evade reality (IV), and sometimes we seek "The poem of pure reality" (IX), according to our need. Thus it is not so much the actual nature of reality that is the poet's concern, but the ego's relation to it as it is caught and expressed in description (XXXI).

Section I states the subject of the poem. Sight, or the data of the senses, is unique ("a thing apart") as the usual or received version ("vulgate") of experience. But this statement is to be qualified again and again, as part of the endless meditation on the question, which, since it grows out of the imagination's effect on reality, is itself an imagined thing ("a giant himself"): what is the nature of reality? What does a house consist of, if not the material substance of reality ("the sun")? And yet these houses are "difficult objects"; they appear as decayed versions of appearance, and