

"Final Soliloquy of the Interior
Paramour" (CP, p. 524)

The title character and speaker of "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" is the lover of reality within us, who, through the imagination, participates in "the intensest rendezvous" with the world. "Light the first light of evening" is an imperative that treats a common act as a ritualistic one in a ceremony in which the light is made to symbolize the power of the imagination which is, in turn, identified with God (l. 14). The light must be lit in a certain way ("as in a room") because its illumination signifies a belief, taken on faith ("for small reason"), that "The world imagined is the ultimate good." In that belief the lover of reality finds his "intensest rendezvous" with the world. Because of that idea we may find respite from all the things that are indifferent to us by passing into an imaginative state of mind, the one thing that is not indifferent, and to which we cling for exactly that reason ("Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor"). Through the efficacy of this state of mind, its "miraculous influence," we can attain that "ultimate good" which is "The world imagined." This condition seems to be one of secular beatitude that occurs "Here, now." It is "miraculous," vital, illuminating, and efficacious (ll. 8-9). In it one loses consciousness of self and of others, and has a sense of an obscure order which is that of the imagination which determined the condition. Finally, the imagination is identified with God, without, however, asserting the reality of God. On the contrary, the reality of the experience is entirely psychological, since the power that caused it by making its presence felt, the imagination, operates only "Within its vital boundary, in the mind."⁶² The point of the identification of God and the imagination is to give an idea of the magnitude of this experience by connecting it with a traditional one; the following line, "How high that highest candle lights the dark," testifies to the degree to which the imagination illuminates and orders an otherwise indifferent world. It is the power of the imagination, "this same light," as it is part of the collective mind of man ("the

central mind"), that makes life in a common secular reality sufficient.

"The Rock" (CP, p. 525)

I. SEVENTY YEARS LATER. From the point of view of age seventy, the poet's past seems an illusion. The merest freedom of physical motion seems unreal. The very air through which one moved one's body no longer exists. The houses in which one lived ("houses of mothers," l. 2) still exist, but they are fixed, dead ("rigid"), caught in the past of memory which is itself fixed, static, and therefore empty of life, of the shadows we and they cast in the passing moment. Even their memory ("The lives these lived in the mind") seems unreal. The past does not exist, and therefore it has no existence in the present, in memory ("Were not and are not"); it is meaningless, "Absurd." So also for the poetry one has written, "The sounds of the guitar," and the words one has spoken. A passionate encounter that once took place now seems mechanical and disconnected from one's present humanity, abstract ("A theorem")—one needs a theory to account for it: it is as if the two figures are part of that nature dependent on the sun, and acting out, through nature, the sun's own purposes. It is as if the emptiness, the meaninglessness of the past, had some purpose ("a *métier*"), an assumption which gave it life, made it vital rather than rigid, therefore changing and impermanent, rather than static. The past one recalls may have been illusion, but it was an illusion that was required by nature, that was in the nature of things, so much so that it produced the ongoing details of existence—as opposed to "nothingness"—that clothe the basic rock of reality, details that satisfy the "*métier*" of existence as objects seen satisfy the faculty of sight, and vividly so, as in one who has been blind. Considered in terms of the "vital assumption" of impermanence, the ongoing detail of the past is felt as life itself in its continuity, which in turn seems part of the "gross" (big, crude, total) totality of existence.

II. THE POEM AS ICON. Part II amends the argument of the preceding part. To recognize the barren rock of reality as being fructified by the vital detail of existence still does not give us an adequate connection with that reality. Such a rapport with reality seems imposed on it ("cover the rock with leaves"), and threatens to dissolve into that feeling of meaningless disconnection described in Part I. In order to heal this division between the ego and reality, either the one or the other must change, must undergo a "cure" that is not imposed, not something merely thought of, a theory, but something that is "beyond forgetfulness." Such a cure, such a connection with the detail of existence might be provided if we made that detail, that produce ("cull") of reality, part of ourselves ("ate the incipient colorings"). "The fiction of the leaves," the necessitous "illusion," or "fiction," of a vital existence discovered in Part I, is the image of reality conceived in the poem, the "icon" of the poem through which we make the vital detail of reality, "the leaves," part of ourselves; since this image unites us with reality, it is a metaphor of "blessedness." In Christian belief man unites with the iconized god by eating his body and blood in the rite of the sacrament. But in this case the icon, the image, is of reality and, moreover, of man as part of that reality, united with it through the image of reality he projects in the poem—thus the icon also "is the man." The leaves, the seasons, the vital detail of existence are the only reality of "the poem, the icon, and the man," since there is no other reality, and this being so the three are united with reality in a "cure." The seasons, changing and derived from the sun, thus time's "copy of the sun," have their unchanging cycles manifested in the leaves (l. 17); they are the fruitful impermanence, the "vital assumption," the "métier," within the meaningless permanence of the "barren rock" of reality. The vital impermanence of the seasons do not merely clothe the barrenness of reality—they call up the vital processes of life itself. They make the palest, most tentative life come to bud; they bring about new meanings in their "engenderings" of life; they motivate the completion of the life cycle; they bring the body

to life, and root the mind in that life. The language here, sometimes referring to human life, sometimes to vegetable life, sometimes applicable to both, indicates that man is part of, not disconnected from, a vital reality; conversely, the blooming of the seasons are like love, the creative force in man. The fruition of the seasons makes the year meaningful ("the year is known"), so that it seems as if its meaning ("its understanding") is the good of that fruition, the good in the pulp inside the skin of a fruit, as if that—the plenty of the natural world—were the final good ("the final found"). Within this plenty, the poem, the image of reality, conceives meaning for the meaninglessness of bare reality, which meaninglessness then "exists no more." Thus the poem ("His words," the words of man who creates the icon), in making reality meaningful, unites man and the image of reality ("the icon"), and in so doing creates the cure for the separation of man from the vital life of reality ("leaves") and, for the "ground" from which that life springs, a cure for our sense of its meaninglessness.

III. FORMS OF THE ROCK IN A NIGHT-HYMN. The third part elaborates on the nature of the rock. It is that base of man's life out of which he grows and from which he descends in death. It is the uncompromising element in which we live ("the air"). It is the reality in which we see the planets, each separately, but, from the point of view of the ego, through poetry, as a harmonious whole (rhapsodize, in an obsolete sense, means to piece a work together). In one manifestation the rock may seem "Turquoise," blue-green, blue for imaginative and green for fertile, as Stevens usually uses these colors; at sunset, it may seem a hateful red, and have an evil influence; at dawn, it may seem good ("rightness") in a way hard to discern. It is the whole of existence itself, and therefore being's only "strength and measure." It is the beginning of the process of creation, "point A," and the end, "the mango's rind" which returns to the earth to fertilize new mangoes, beginning the process again at point B. It is the field into which tranquility must be brought if it is to be realized, the bulk and strength of things ("main"), in-

cluding the mind, that from which the human starts, and to which it must come back. It includes space itself; it is, for the mind, the gate to the enclosure of reality; it is the exterior fact which day illumines, and the imaginative data which night encourages: the pleasurable creations of the imagination ("midnight-minting fragrances"), including such hymns in praise of the rock as this one, realized in an intense state of the imagination, as in a dream ("vivid sleep").

"The River of Rivers in Connecticut"
(*CP*, p. 533)

"The River of Rivers in Connecticut" develops Stevens' idea of the nature of existence. The title does not locate the river, so much as it indicates that it flows through Connecticut, as well as every place else. Rather, the river is "this side of Stygia," this side of obliteration. Stevens explained the description of the third line of the first stanza as follows: "This refers to the distortion of trees not growing in conditions natural to them and not to houses deprived of a setting of trees. The look of death is the look of the deprivation of something vital" (Poggioli, p. 185). The river, on the contrary, is vital: it does not flow mechanically to a destination, but rather it is its "mere flowing" that is desirable, "a gayety," that is itself an end. Therefore no ghost, or "shadow," walks on its banks, for it is the river of life, not of death. Like Styx, this river is "fateful": it is as impossible to escape the flow of existence as it is to escape death. No agency, like Charon, the "ferryman," is required to lead us into its current, since all things, including Charon if he existed, are by nature propelled by the current's force. The river is not an abstract essence of things, but consists of the tangible reality of common objects, such as "The steeple at Farmington," and the town of Haddam, which is described as if it were a fluent part of the "flashing" river ("shines and sways"). Hence, it is called "the third commonness with light and air," the common reality which the atmosphere of light and air contains. The

river is, furthermore, a "curriculum," or a running merely, without object or qualification; it is simply an energy, "a vigor"; it is, finally, not the idea of the river, but the localized manifestation of that idea as here in Connecticut, "a local abstraction," an abstraction that exists only in the concrete. Since it has no identity except in its local and concrete manifestations, it is "an unnamed flowing" which, however, contains in it space and the changes that occur therein, as with the seasons, and the mixture of knowledge and belief, or "folk-lore," that we derive through sensation. It is like a river which flows to no destination, as a sea flows into nothing else, because there is nothing else besides it.

"The Course of a Particular" (*OP*, p. 96)

"The Course of a Particular" has been called by Yvor Winters one of Stevens' "greatest poems—perhaps his greatest."⁵³ But he notes that whereas in the original appearance in *Hudson Review* (Vol. IV, No. 1, Spring, 1951) the next to last line read "final finding of the ear," in *Opus Posthumous*, as a result of a typographical error, "ear" was printed as "air." He concludes of the poem: "In its first appearance it is comprehensible and deeply moving. In its second appearance the conclusion evaporates into vague sentiment and a masterpiece is destroyed." Samuel French Morse has confirmed this correction as well grounded.⁵⁴ The "particular" in question is the sound of the wind in the leaves, and its "course" consists of the series of modifications in meaning that it undergoes in the mind of the observer who speaks the poem. Although it is a wintery day on which the leaves make a mournful sound, its emptiness is lessened by the shades and shapes of winter scenery. But as one listens to the cry of the leaves, without projecting one's feelings into their sound, or into the winter scene ("One holds off and merely hears the cry"), one becomes increasingly isolated from the landscape. It is no longer a question of whether the wintery scene seems more or less like nothingness, for it becomes progressively plainer as the