

PART II

THE THEORY OF POETRY IS THE LIFE OF POETRY

## CHAPTER IV

### THE 'SITE' OF STEVENS' POETRY

In an essay on the German poet Trakl, Heidegger writes, "every great poet creates his poetry out of one single poetic statement only."<sup>1</sup> The task of literary interpretation, then, is to find the locus out of which the poet speaks, the place or site from which the poems arise, for, only out of the place of the single, unspoken poem does the individual poem shine and sound. One can locate this central poem in Stevens in his unending meditation on the abiding identity of poetry and reality. This is the ground, the site from which all his work from Harmonium to The Rock and the last poems, originates.

Stevens' poetry does not develop in a chronological or dialectic manner; it does not move from one stage to the next. Its movement is rather concentric and all the poems move toward the central poem. There is no real change of site from the poetry of Harmonium to the poetry of his second flowering, no real 'kehre' or turn in his basic affirmations. Harmonium contains all the assumptions of his phenomenological poetics that his later poetry develops more fully. The only difference is

that in Harmonium he creates his own aesthetics from within the existing poetic tradition, while with Ideas of Order, and most certainly with The Man with the Blue Guitar, he attains, what he calls, his individual, "authentic language" (L, 231) to articulate his poetic discourse, singlemindedly to the end. And yet a seminal poem like "The Snow Man" (CP, 9-10) in Harmonium equals anything in the later poetry, both in its lyrical meditateness and in expressing the basic poetic affirmations of Stevens: the paradox of being which is nothing in itself but manifests itself in what appears, what is - "the nothing that is"; the decentralized beholder who rids himself of the egocentric stance of the will to power over things and adopts a more genuine stance of humility, wonderment and joy, being "nothing himself;" the act of decreation that enables him to behold "nothing that is not there," and the final participation in, and discovery of, the being of winter that reveals itself in "the pine-trees crusted with snow" and "the junipers shagged with ice." The poem anticipates not only "The Rock" (CP, 525-530), but also, it is interesting to note, the central premises of Heidegger's phenomenological ontology of Being and Time that was to appear a few years later in 1927.

Stevens' poetry approaches the central site, the question of the identity of poetry and reality, from varying angles. In Harmonium Stevens wrote, as he said, what was then called 'pure poetry' (L, 288), that is, the poetry of extra-ordinary sounds

and extravagant word combinations. But the guadiness and galey of language were a decreative strategy directed at destroying the old ways of seeing things, and simultaneously revealing reality afresh. "The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP, 27-46) is Stevens' first sustained attempt at defining the identity of reality and imagination by showing the inadequacy of either existing by itself. With Ideas of Order Stevens committed himself totally to the task of defining poetry, and each of the subsequent works seems to concentrate on one aspect of the problem. The need for decreation is the focal point of Ideas of Order. The tone of these poems is one of rejection of all our inherited, idealistic conceptions, of waving adieu to gods and angels, to hyperaesthetic Florida, to the psuedo-romantic nightingale, to all the sovereigns of the soul, and a return to our ordinary, familiar world. The Man with the Blue Guitar explores the nature of creative transformation, the paradox of creation stated in the first poem as to how the blue guitar transforms things as they are without changing them into anything else. Parts of a World focuses on the acceptance of the lived, temporal reality and the belief that the "world itself (is) the truth" (CP, 242) we know and experience. The problem of the "amassing harmony" (CP, 403) of the imagination and reality is most fully exposed in Stevens' central poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" in Transport to Summer. The poem celebrates poetry's power to reveal the "single certain truth" in its "living changingness" (CP, 380), the "abstract" in its "change" and the "pleasure"

that results from it. Stevens' later poetry of The Auroras of Autumn, The Rock and his last poems collected in Opus Posthumous are a most profound meditation on the being, the mystery of reality, for instance, of the rock, of the river of rivers in Connecticut, or of the "gold-feathered bird" (OP, 117).

These are, of course, broad emphases, for Stevens' entire corpus is one concentrated effort at getting at the poem of reality. As the following chapters illustrate, all his poetry originates from, and illumines in turn, this central site.