

Six

La Dispute

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain,
Whence the stone would fall back of its own weight.
They had thought with some reason
that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld.
Myths are made for the imagination.
As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort
of a body straining to raise the huge stone
To roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over;
One sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone,
The wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands.
At the very end of his long effort, the purpose is achieved.
Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments
Toward the lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit.
He goes back down to the plain.

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me.
A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself.
I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step
Toward the torment of which he will never know the end.
That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering,
That is the hour of consciousness.
At each of those moments when he leaves the heights
And gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods,
He is superior to his fate.
He is stronger than his rock.

The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks,
And his fate is no less absurd.
But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious.
Sisyphus knows the whole extent of his wretched condition:
It is what he thinks of during his descent.

There is no fate that can not be surmounted by scorn.
If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow,
It can also take place in joy.
When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory,
It happens that melancholy arises in man's heart:
This is the rock's victory.

But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged.
Thus, Edipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it.
But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins.
Yet at the same moment, he realizes that the only bond
linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl.
Then a tremendous remark rings out:
"Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age
And the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well."

"I conclude that all is well," says Edipus.
And that remark is sacred.

It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man.
It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted.

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein.
His fate belongs to him.
The rock is still rolling.