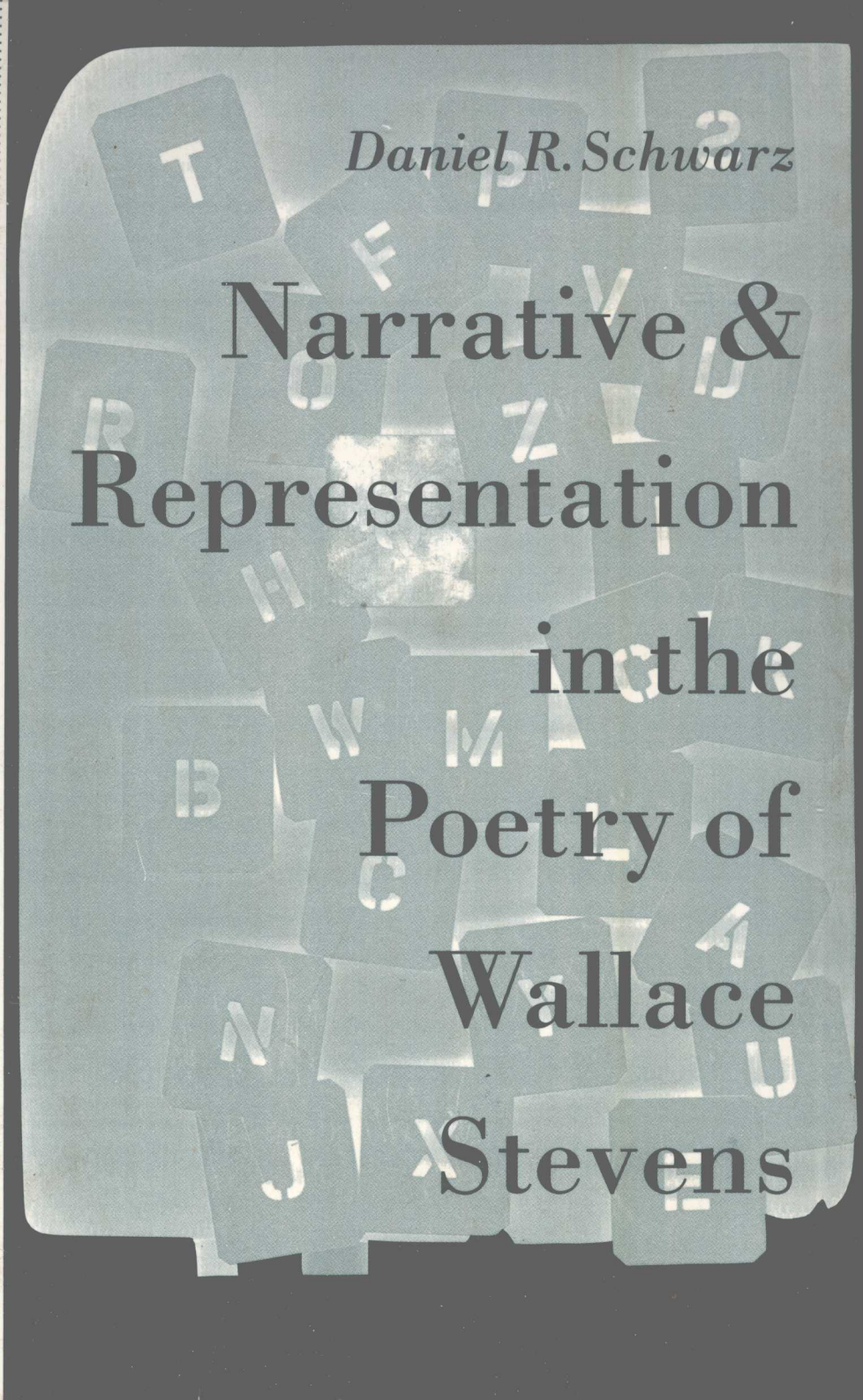

Daniel R. Schwarz

Narrative & Representation in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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'A Tune Beyond Us, Yet Ourselves'

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NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATION IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

Also by Daniel R. Schwarz

THE CASE FOR A HUMANISTIC POETICS

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL, 1890–1930

READING JOYCE'S 'ULYSSES'

THE HUMANISTIC HERITAGE: CRITICAL THEORIES OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL FROM JAMES TO HILLIS MILLER

CONRAD: 'ALMAYER'S FOLLY' TO 'UNDER WESTERN EYES'

CONRAD: THE LATER FICTION

DISRAELI'S FICTION

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To paraphrase Stevens, my children, parents, and brother provide the world in which I walk.

For my best teachers:
my students – graduate and undergraduate –
and my NEH participants

A Note on Texts

I have cited Wallace Stevens's works as follows:

CP = *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage, 1955).

PM = *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. by Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

NA = *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

OP = *Opus Posthumous*. Revised, enlarged, and corrected edition, ed. by Milton J. Bates (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

L = *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Edited by Holly Stevens. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1977). The numbers in parentheses are letter numbers, not the page number.

Contents

1

Reading Wallace Stevens: Rhetoric and Representation

FIRST PRINCIPLES

It is an oddity of our intellectual discourse that literary studies are becoming more abstract, even as social sciences are becoming more empirical. We are adopting the discarded and discredited Marxist apparatus, and speaking as sociologists did a decade ago. But in speaking of Stevens, do we not need an empirical criticism that speaks to his fascination with what he called 'Local Objects' (in a poem of that name), objects which ask and receive definition from 'a spirit without a foyer' – a trope he used for himself as poet? As Stevens wrote, 'The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact' (*PM*, 206). I think what Helen Vendler has called Stevens's 'brutality of style' – which she sees in his early work – indicates how his mind seeks to come to terms with the roughness, intrusions, resistances of life: the everyday and pedestrian as well as the disruptive, the disappointing, the ephemeral, and the mediocre.[1] The essence of a Stevens poem is the continuing dialogue – the ever-changing process – between the mind and the world, and the continuing quest within the mind for the appropriate language – what might be called the semiological quest – to render that dialogue.

Reading Stevens also depends on seeing how the poems invite – indeed rhetorically demand – a dialogue between two modes of reading. The first mode of reading – which responds to various aspects of a humanistic poetics, including biographical, historical, thematic, and other mimetic perspectives – depends upon grounding the poems in a dramatic situation, defining the voice as a character, seeing the metaphors and metonymies as psychic and moral gestures of the speaker, and, like a detective, discovering the strands of plot beneath the surface and discovering how the

submerged or truncated events imply significance in a necessary and probable sequence. The other mode – which includes deconstruction and some but not most gynocritical perspectives – follows the wit and play of images, enjoys the word-play and local patterns as if they were part of an abstract design, and savours sounds as if they were musical notes; this reading resists recuperating the meaning in traditional terms and lets the polysemous possibilities of language exfoliate upon the mind and gives the mind permission to create its own meaning. In some circles, it would be sufficient to call the first mode of reading *authorial reading* to indicate the belief that such reading recuperates the author's text, and the second mode *resistant* or deconstructive reading to indicate a scepticism about authoritative readings and about the possibility of language telling us about anything but itself. But Stevens's poems *enable* both modes of reading; one might say that his authorial readings include the rhetoricity of resistance, and that resistant readings include necessarily an intent of authorial enablement.

I want to test for poetry the pluralistic ideology of reading for which I have been arguing in my work on fiction. What I wish to do is to discuss plot and character in some of Stevens's major lyrics, narrative poems, and longer poems without sacrificing close attention to linguistic details. Even as I read the language on the page as a verbal event, I want to look beyond the words to see what they signify. Reading Stevens depends on our using a pluralistic aesthetic, belonging to diverse interpretative communities, and establishing a dialogue between the poem and our responses. It means reading the poem within a range of possibilities, and understanding that poet and reader make choices. But the poems invite pluralistic responses because of their very allusiveness; to even try to set them in a concrete monolithic reading as if they were traditional lyrics is to foreclose possibilities. For the storytelling impulse of traditional narrative, and the dramatic context which a voice – often in deep thought, sometimes in pain, frequently frustrated – reveals are essential to Stevens's poetry. Paradoxically, their secret codes and apparent lack of narrative distance become both an enabling and essential condition to the reader's weaving a narrative in which the words can be understood in a referential context. It is not so much that their openness to interpretation invites the reader in, but that the reader is enclosed in a room from which his desire for narrative becomes the exit to understanding.

STEVENS AS NARRATIVE POET

It is precisely because Stevens is not primarily a narrative poet – because his is a meditative and intellectual poetry – that he is a test case for my view that we respond to even the most lyrical and abstract poem as a narrative which organises at least the germ of a story. We should acknowledge that narrative and lyrical impulses coexist in virtually all poems in some degree, each helping to define the other. The mimetic impulse is essential to our reading and that impulse seeks the essence of the story – the act – from which the voice defines itself. Yet the impulse of a voice caught in emotion can never be fully contained within the limits of story. To quote Stevens from 'The Plain Sense of Things' – a wonderful lyric, which implicitly acknowledges the need for story and life – narrative and mimesis '[h]ad to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge, / Required, as a necessity requires.' Behind every poem is there not an implicit narrative giving the voice an occasion, a context of experience, in which it speaks? Because for Stevens the imaginative man is a lonely, self-isolated figure reaching out for connection – for continuity, for the potential of language to order experience into a narrative which will draw lines to the isolated dots of our experience – the quest for narrative is a Stevens theme. As Hayden White has remarked,

> [n]arrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific. . . . Far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted.[2]

Rereading a Stevens lyric – often no more than a few sentences or even less – one sees that immanent in the telling is a necessary and probable plot, which, as with most plots, is not fully revealed until the end. The temporality of Stevens's poems – the speaker's sense of time passing, the emphasis on memory, the reference to prior moods and even moods that are defined in prior poems – itself self-consciously insists on narrative arrangement.

Stevens's poems, including his lyrics, imply not merely a story, but a succession of episodes organized narratively into a plot. For this reason they are less self-reflexive and solipsistic than is often assumed. In a sense, too, the poems are events in an epic that could be entitled 'The Growth of a Poet's Mind', an epic based on the assumption that the poet's imaginings are doing important work for us by teaching us to see more than we can see ourselves: 'As part of nature he is part of us. / His rarities are ours: may they be fit / And reconcile us to our selves in those / True reconcilings, dark, pacific, words, / And the adroiter harmonies of their fall' ('Academic Discourse at Havana',1923). Each poem is an episode in the development and evolution of Stevens's mind; yet each also exists as a part of a synchronic perspective in which he is the radial point of a series of concentric circles; in one sense his poems are one poem and the texture – its iterations and patterns – is like the intricate weaving of an elaborate Persian rug.

I believe that readers, no matter how resistant they are to seeing texts in humanistic terms, always find patterns of recognizable human behaviour. If we do not respond to the dramatic interaction between the mind in action of the speaker and the resources of language that he seeks to express his thoughts, we miss the essence of Stevens. In Stevens's poems the reader experiences the quest for the words that would give to ephemeral thoughts the tangibility of things. To understand Stevens we must respond in each poem to the passionate struggle with his subject, to the interchange between his imagination and reality, and the transaction between his imagination and the words he seeks to render it. The plots of his narratives mime those struggles, those interchanges, and those transactions as much as the emotions that give rise to them. For Stevens the mental life is reality, and its narrative is as much a story as an adventure-tale or myth: 'What our eyes behold may well be the text of life but one's meditations on the text and disclosures of these meditations are no less part of the structure of reality' (*NA*, 76).

Finally, his poems demand our attention to issues of character and characterization, issues that are essential to story and narrative. From the outset many of his poems invite us to ask not only 'Who is speaking to whom and on what occasion?' or 'What are the feelings revealed by the isolated speaker?' but 'Who are the characters in that poem?' For example, in the opening line of 'The Idea of Order at Key West', is 'she' a real figure that the speaker sees, or

simply an abstraction? It should be a test of my view that privileges mimesis of character if we can discuss the speaker of Wallace Stevens's poems in terms of his human voice.[3] What I shall do is isolate the relationship between speaker and character and speaker and reader in a number of poems.

THE POET IN THE TEXT: METAPHORS OF THE SELF

A crucial strand of my argument will be to establish the importance of the relationship between Stevens the man and Stevens the poet. I contend that the work is the ultimate metaphor for the author, painter, or composer who creates. We cannot disconnect the threads of the poetry from the warp and the woof of the life and the historical period which shaped that life. As Stevens put it, 'It is often said of a man that his work is autobiographical in spite of every subterfuge. It cannot be otherwise. Certainly, from the point of view from which we are now regarding it, it cannot be otherwise, even though it may be totally without reference to himself (*NA*, 121). The pluralism for which I have been arguing understands the expressionist perspective which looks to the author's psyche for some of the clues to reading him or her. As Stevens wrote, 'The truth is that a man's sense of the world dictates his subjects to him and that this sense is derived from his personality, his temperament, over which he has little control and possibly none, except superficially. It is not a literary problem. It is the problem of his mind and nerves' (*NA*, 122).

In 1937, Stevens commented in his *Commonplace Book* on a passage from a piece by Graham Bell entitled 'Cézanne at the Lefevre': '[The quoted passage] adds to subject and manner the thing that is incessently overlooked: the artist, the presence of the determining personality. Without that reality no amount of other things matter much.'[4] Stevens would have liked someone to say of him what Bell said of Cézanne: 'With Cézanne integrity was the thing, and integrity never allowed him to become fixed at any one point in his development, but sent him onward toward new discoveries of technique, new realisations of the motive' (*Commonplace Book*, 53). In an omitted section of 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', Stevens insisted upon the presence in the work of the artist, in this case Picasso:

> We take a man like Picasso, for instance, and assume here is Picasso and there is his work. This is nonsense, where the one is, the other is, this son of an intellectual and antiquarian, with his early imaginative periods, as inevitable in such a case as puberty, may sit in his studio, half-a-dozen men at once conversing together. They reach a conclusion and all of them go back into one of them who seats himself and begins to paint. Is it one of them within him that dominates and makes the design or rather could it be? Can Picasso choose? Free will does not go so far.[5]

Stevens himself imagined the act of creation as a dialogue between various personae, including those that he had created in prior poems.

Stevens's world is populated by characters who are frequently versions of himself – masks he has created to explore the possibilities of the mind. Even if they are imaginary and feminine – muse figures, his interior paramours (what Bloom calls the 'reverie-laden woman' of 'Sunday Morning') – they are exfoliations of himself. In the guise of a detached objective poet, he actually writes poems that reveal himself and are metaphors of the self.[6] Not only is the persona of the poet present in the major lyrics and longer poems, but these poems reflect his personal history – his relationship to his father, his inadequate marriage, his double life as an executive and poet. Stevens is a ventriloquist who takes on myriad stances, often several in the same poem.

Stevens's poems are not linguistic games, but urgent responses to a world which was confusing and unsatisfactory. Peeking through Stevens's poems, in a kind of pentimento, are the unresolved planes – or identities – of his double life as an insurance executive and as a poet, as a respectable married man firmly established as a bourgeois figure and as a member of the avant-garde. Stevens is, paradoxically, a Puritan who demanded of himself an ascetic life and excoriated himself for the smallest departures from that life, and a hedonist who revelled in the freedom of Key West. He was a man committed to materially improving his own lot and to conventional patrician values, and who enjoyed, at least voyeuristically and vicariously, the playful sexuality and intellectual adventuresomeness of the avant-garde life when his imaginary journeys and actual experiences took him far from the world of office and wife.

In his daily life as an insurance executive in Hartford, Stevens was usually a proud but shy and unassuming figure, a reticent

man. Indeed, does he not often speak, in his less confident moments, of himself as a 'dull scholar', a kind of bard of the local, the ordinary, the nominalistic, even the pedestrian? For Stevens art was a compensation for the control and understatement of his public mask: 'The incessant desire for freedom in literature or in any of the arts is a desire for freedom in life. The desire is irrational. The result is the irrational searching the irrational . . .' (*OP*, 121). He needed to turn his back on the priggish morality of the woman in 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' (1922) – perhaps a version not only of a moralistic other from whom he could never escape, but of his wife from whom he was estranged by sensibility and temperament – and discover in his poetry his *desire*. When Stevens is speaking, as he often does, of the muse or interior paramour, we should realize that such an alter ego is compensation for the kind of wife he wanted, the empathetic other who would understand his feelings and his poetry. As Joan Richardson puts it, 'The roles that Elsie and he needed the other to fulfill were parental. And though they could not succeed in playing these out as desired, perversions of them, forced by circumstances of their lives, ensued. They each wanted the unequivocal approval from the other that they had never experienced in childhood and youth.'[7]

Helen Vendler speaks of the need to substitute 'I' for 'He' in reading his lyrics. Often both are present. For Stevens's poems contain many voices. Even when we hear an 'I', is not the omniscient voice present as an ironic second character in a duet with the speaker? Do we not at times implicitly and explicitly respond to the dramatization of a listener as another character – even while raising the possibility that voice, listeners and characters are different versions of the same self? At times, it is helpful to think that Stevens dramatizes different versions of the same self; at other times, we think we hear a ventriloquistic voice wearing many masks. But from yet another perspective, we may find it helpful in reading Stevens to abandon the concept of a consistent persona and to admit the possibility of hearing multiple – and at times contradictory and cacophanous – voices, as if they were intersecting planes on the order of a Cubist collage or diverse motifs in a symphony.

Reading Stevens's letters, we hear the voice of a man who is the successor to a Victorian tradition – epitomized by Arnold – which wanted to hold the Philistines at arm's length while providing a cultural enclave for themselves and their followers; yet we also

hear a modernist dazzled by the motion, energy, and excitement of the modern city and the possibilities offered for art by new circumstances. Stevens oscillates between the world of fact, symbolized by his career as an insurance lawyer, and a world of imagination. We hear the voice of a man drawn by iconoclastic, ascetic, and contemplative impulses, and one who desperately wishes to feel a kinship with his fellows. Writing of a distinction between the 'ascetic' Courbet – 'He was an ascetic by virtue of all his rejections and also by virtue of his devotion to the real' (*L*, no. 685) – and the 'humanistic' Giorgione, he wrote: 'What I am thinking of is that the ascetic is negative and the humanistic affirmative, and that they face in two different ways which would bring them together ultimately at the other side of the world, face to face . . .' (*L*, no. 685). Stevens wished to avoid the poles of realism and fantasy and write a poetry of negotiating and crossing back and forth between the two: '[A] real poetry, that is to say, a poetry that is not poetical or that is merely the notation of objects in themselves poetic is a poetry divested of poetry' (*L*, no. 685).

Stevens is our poet of loneliness. As Vendler has written,

> Stevens's meditations on the restlessness of the soul, the heart, and the mind are the most unsparing account in poetry of the oscillations of skepticism and faith. . . . Never was there a more devout believer – in love, in the transcendent, in truth, in poetry – than Stevens. And never was there a more corrosive disbeliever – disillusioned in love, deprived of religious belief, and rejecting in disgust their credulous 'trash' of previous poems (as he says in 'The Man on the Dump').[8]

Poignant feelings of separation, isolation, and marginality pervade Stevens's poetry. In Stevens we feel the loneliness and isolation of the speaker reduced to a mite in the cosmos, nearly overwhelmed by the world in which he finds himself. The opening words are often the search for a stance, the beginning of an act of self-defence, a drawing of the line between life and art, as he seeks refuge on the side representing art.

The reason for the obscurity of Stevens's *beginnings* is that the poems are about the quest for the subject or the meaning of an incident. His exegesis cannot begin until his precritical perceptions of the situation are presented; for within Stevens the voices of presentation and of exegesis co-exist. That is why we feel that the