

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

Anecdote of the Jar (1916)

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

ANALYSIS

“A poem which has been at least twice misinterpreted by commentators who have not taken the trouble to understand Stevens as a whole.... ‘Anecdote of the Jar’... Stanley P. Chase has written of this poem: ‘Very likely the little poem is meant to suggest nothing more than the superiority, to an intensely civilized person, of the simplest bit of handicraft over any extent of unregulated “nature”...’ And Howard Baker writes with the same obtuseness, but with greater elaborateness: ‘Similarly a wild and disorderly landscape is transformed into order by the presence of a symmetrical vase.... The jar acts in the imagination like one of the poles of the earth, the imaginary order of the lines of latitude and longitude projecting around the pole. The jar itself—simple and symmetrical, a product of the human consciousness and not of nature—is a very fitting symbol for man’s dominion over nature...’

If the poem ended with the fourth line, there might be an imperfect justification of the interpretation offered by these writers, for in the first four lines the wilderness is not only dominated by the jar—as, in fact, it is dominated throughout the poem—but it is called slovenly. If we examine the next two lines, however, we see that the phrase, ‘the slovenly wilderness,’ is in fact a slovenly ellipsis. The wilderness is slovenly after it has been dominated and not before: It ‘sprawled around, no longer wild.’

The jar is the product of the human mind, as the critics remark, and it dominates the wilderness; but it does not give order to the wilderness—it is vulgar and sterile, and it transforms the wilderness into the semblance of a deserted picnic ground. Its sterility is indicated in the last three lines, and if the jar is to be accepted as symbolic of the human intellect, then the poem is in part another example of the same theme which we found in ‘The Stars of Tallapoosa,’ but expressed this time with disillusionment and a measure of disgust. The poem would appear to be primarily an expression of the corrupting effect of the intellect upon natural beauty, and hence a purely romantic performance. To read any measure of neo-humanism into Stevens is as foolish as to endeavor, in the manner of certain young critics of a few years ago, to read into him a kind of incipient and trembling consciousness of the beauty of Marxism.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 435-37

“Like the girl singing by the sea in ‘The Idea of Order at Key West,’ the jar placed on the hill in Tennessee in ‘Anecdote of the Jar’ seems to impose order on the chaos of Nature by its very presence. If

the jar is interpreted as a symbol of art, the poem becomes another of Stevens' explorations of the relationship of art (or imagination) and reality. Henry W. Wells, in *Introduction to Wallace Stevens*, writes of the poem: '...the "I" may well be taken to signify the spirit of art in America and the choice of Tennessee may refer to the group of highly imaginative writers who somewhat abruptly arose in Tennessee early in the present century, chief among whom were the Nashville "Fugitives." Art had come to a land hitherto much of a wilderness, aesthetically considered; by its interpretive and illuminating power it brought order into what had been previously chaos: 'The slovenly wilderness' was transformed by the nobility of human understanding. The image from ceramics is especially felicitous, for in almost all cultures ceramics best represents the essence of design, an atomic power within the mind. It is also elemental in the sense that it is the art of the human hand applied to clay that is part of the common earth'."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 976-77

"There has been some dispute about the interpretation of this poem, notably as to whether the poet is for Nature or for Art: This is irrelevant, because the point of the jar's difference, and the manner of its difference, are what matters. It belongs to a different order of reality, already completely significant and orderly, fixed and immortal. In one sense it is more vital, in another sense less so, than the 'slovenly wilderness' around it; the poem itself reconciles opposites by using the jar as a symbol...of what moves in stillness, is dead in life, whose meaning and being are the same."

Frank Kermode
The Romantic Image
(1957; Random House/Vintage 1964) 48

"'Anecdote of the Jar' is on the surface a simple allegory of a jar placed on a hill in Tennessee and somehow transforming the wilderness. Critics, however, have widely disagreed as to its interpretation. Stanley P. Chase wrote, '...the little poem is meant to suggest nothing more than the superiority...of the simplest bit of handicraft over any extent of unregulated nature,' and O'Connor speaks of the jar 'imposing its order' on the wilderness. But Yvor Winters argues that, although the jar does dominate the wilderness, 'it does not give order to the wilderness—it is vulgar and sterile, and it transforms the wilderness into the semblance of a deserted picnic ground.' This latter interpretation has come to be the accepted one; it is not until the jar is placed in the middle of it that the wilderness becomes 'slovenly.' Man's works blight the naturalness of the countryside and make it shabby and synthetic; the poem is an objective picture of the slovenly borderline between civilization and wilderness."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 522

"The 'jar' which Stevens places 'upon a hill in Tennessee' did give order to the 'wilderness' around it... Logically: the man-made object (one cannot but think of a mason jar and recall that in the 1920's, especially in the South, mason jars were often filled with corn whiskey—i.e. moonshine) creates by composing, not by bringing into being, as does everything—i.e., not nothing—else in Tennessee. Thus the self does not create the world, the 'reality'...on which it is operative. Rather it creates its versions of the world, which come to be versions of itself in the act of exercising its primary function: At the least, to realize its humanity; at most, to make men human."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 381

Michael Hollister (2015)