
Nashville
Portland
Oak Grove
Bethpage
Gallatin
Mount Juliet
Murfreesboro
Eagleville
Cold Spring
Spot
Vernon
Nunnelly
Wright
Lyles
Fairfield
Only
Shipps Bend
Centerville
Twomey
Littleton
Coble
Lobelville
Beaverdam Springs
Aetna
Kimmins
HICKMAN
Chapel Hill
Hampshire
Columbia
Ashwood
Westhaven
Santa Fe
MAURY
WILLIAMSON
230
100
50
438
412
99
43
148

PASSWORDS
Teaching Wallace Stevens

the circle in the square

ZEV LEVINSON

After Shakespeare, Wallace Stevens is one of the greatest verbal acrobats in English. Few other poets succeed as Stevens does in playing with and celebrating language while simultaneously engaging in the most important questions regarding human existence. He incorporates into his philosophical conundrums a great deal of humor, caprice, humility, candor, and joie de vivre. He also adds a healthy dose of abstraction. But, when reading Stevens, it's helpful to remember that he is not trying to be intentionally obscure. Stevens reflects on the nature of obscurity in a letter to a friend:

> A man who wrote with the idea of being deliberately obscure would be an imposter. But that is not the same thing as a man who allows a difficult thing to remain difficult because, if he explained it, it would, to his way of thinking, destroy it.[1]

Given Stevens's penchant for being difficult, I am fond of teaching "Anecdote of the Jar." I have found that its seemingly casual locution and its humble milieu prevent my students from being intimidated and yet the poem manages to grow more curious with each read.

Anecdote of the Jar

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.

The title immediately signals that we are about to hear a story. And the title hints that this story is likely to be a fairly ordinary one, as it is not the anecdote of the dense violet jar, or the magical speaking jar, just article-free anecdote of the adjective-free jar. This is typical of Stevens's tendency to choose titles that downplay the contents of his poems (e.g., "The Plain Sense of Things," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and "Man Carrying Thing"). After all, is this anecdote plain? Is the jar? Yes, and no.

This famous twelve-line poem interweaves natural imagery and abstract thinking, and may be a bit difficult for young minds to fully grasp. Its combination of simplicity and difficulty is akin to other Imagist poems of the period, including William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow."[2] In Williams's poem, not only does much of our lives depend upon the wheel(barrow), and agriculture in general, but more importantly our lives depend upon perception. All things exist in relationship to each other, and conditions play an essential role in how we perceive the world around us. To give my students a sense of what this means, I'll look out the window and improvise something like "so much depends upon a red Toyota sprinkled with Humboldt mist beside the white school building." They get it!

While Williams's images shimmer with clarity, practically leaping off the page with their vividness, Stevens's jar is "gray and bare," and therefore somewhat difficult to see in of itself. It does "not give of bird or bush," does not render the intricate pictures painted on Keats's Grecian urn; you won't find any "marble men and maidens overwrought."[3] This jar is antithetical to Keats's self-contained *objet d'art*, its story is not inscribed into its bare physique. Rather, like a body of water, it reflects and focuses that which surrounds it. It is a "port" (or a portal) which informs and gives shape to the invisible element of air. The same might be said of poetry itself.

Why did Stevens, this Yankee from Connecticut, choose Tennessee as the setting for his slovenly wilderness? I suppose because the humid and often fecund South represented to him a certain degree of untamable growth, a kind of chaos. The placement of a manmade object on the hill, accompanied by Stevens's orderly pacing in (roughly) iambic tetrameter, is an attempt to establish a solar-system-like order, a sun around which the wilderness revolves. The result, however, may be less than ideal if the jar simply becomes a metaphor for human domination.

Stevens is exploring the tension between freedom and order—or, you might say, between imagination and reality. These two practices—using one's imagination and perceiving the structure of reality—are what constitute poetry. "Things seen are things as seen," Stevens writes in "Adagia."

As a teaching model, "Anecdote of the Jar" can give rise to wonderful student work. I ask my students to think of an object that significantly changes how they perceive the world around them. Instead of "the television" or "my cellphone," I press them to come up with something untechnological. And, to choose a location in which the object is not quite at home. How would a bird interact with the object? How would a car swerve not to hit the object? How would the wind change and reorient the object?

A good beginning, if one needs a specific prompt, is to write "I placed..." on the board. Then, I'll often get the ball rolling by saying: "I placed a Coke bottle in the desert, I placed a guitar upon a mountaintop, I dropped a book beside the shore, I hung a crystal in New York City, I unwound a spool of thread along a riverbank, I leaned a mirror against a tree." The poems that emerge often feel a lot like odes, but there's always something unexagerrated, honed, and mysterious about the work.

The Rose

The rose gently perches
on the palm of a
rugged person.
The person looks at
the beauty that lies
before her.

She sits, perching, never moving
gazing at the flower
that does not move.

—Carissa W., 9th grade

The River

There is a river I dream of.
It's a beautiful emerald green.
It runs through a very large canyon.
It's a place I dream about every
once in a while.
It's not a happy place. It's beautiful,

but it's my hell.
I can't explain it. I know this place.
No fire. No brimstone. Just the river,
and just the rock. Just water, and
just stone Two simple components make
my own hell. A pretty hell. Just water,
and just rock.

—*Derek P., 9th grade*

Notes

1. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 294.

2. Williams and Stevens were friends, and I find it curious that these two poems were published almost simultaneously in 1923.

3. Stevens was deeply familiar with Keats's odes. Keats's line "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter...." is perhaps echoed in Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in which he writes: "I do not know which to prefer.../ The blackbird whistling/ Or just after."