Appalachian Ecocriticism *and the* Paradox *of* Place

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The University *of* Georgia Press
Athens

Athens, Georgia 30602
www.ugapress.org

Designed by Kaelin Chappell Broaddus
Set in 9.5/13 Dolly Pro Regular by Kaelin Chappell Broaddus

Most University of Georgia Press titles are
available from popular e-book vendors.

Printed digitally

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cory, Jessica, editor. | Wright, Laura, 1970– editor.
Title: Appalachian ecocriticism and the paradox of place /
edited by Jessica Cory and Laura Wright.
Description: Athens : The University of Georgia Press, [2023] |
Includes bibliographical references and index. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2022052886 (print) | LCCN 2022052887 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780820363943 (hardback) | ISBN 9780820363950 (paperback) |
ISBN 9780820363929 (epub) | ISBN 9780820363936 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: American literature—Appalachian Region—
History and criticism. | Appalachian Region—Intellectual life. |
Appalachian Region—In literature. | Appalachian Region—
In motion pictures. | Ecocriticism.
Classification: LCC PS286.A6 A5924 2023 (print) | LCC PS286.A6 (ebook) |
DDC 810.9/974—dc23/eng/20230124
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022052886
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022052887

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KEVIN E. O'DONNELL

Introduction; or, Can Appalachian Studies and Ecocriticism Refigure an Abstract Modernist Masterpiece as a Journalistic / Environmental Artifact?

Wallace Stevens is one of the great modernist poets of the twentieth century, and "Anecdote of the Jar" is one of his best-known poems. The poem has been widely anthologized and has inspired much commentary and discussion, as well as puzzlement. Notoriously oblique, opaque, and obscure, the piece is also playful, mystical, and vaguely comical. The first-person narrator places a jar on a hill in Tennessee. That act of placing the jar seems somehow to tame the "slovenly wilderness." The jar organizes the wilderness, which is then "no longer wild." Many readers have thus taken the poem as a kind of allegory for the creative act of the poet, whose Godlike gesture brings order and meaning to otherwise anarchic experience. The poem is therefore often held forth as a statement of modernist poetics.

Certainly, the poem invites readings along these lines, as I will discuss further. Yet I would also like to show how the poem can be read—over and above its allegorical meaning—in relation to a particular place and time.

Stevens most likely conceived the poem during a brief April 1918 visit to the East Tennessee town of Elizabethton, in Carter County, where he spent a day in his role as the head of the Surety Claims Department for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Stevens was in Carter County during the final frenzy of industrial logging of the great Appalachian deciduous hardwood forest. I show here how the poem dramatizes the mythic clash of forces that characterized the natural resource extraction that accompanied modernism in Appalachia.

For this reading, I use two critical lenses. Here I show how insights from both Appalachian studies and ecocriticism provide a surprising new perspective on Stevens's poem. Appalachian studies reminds readers to value local knowledge and to keep an eye out for the sort of economic colonialism that was so prevalent in the region during the latter half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth. And Appalachian studies likewise provides a well-developed history of natural resource exploitation in the region. Indeed, a pretty substantial body of environmental history exists that is specifically about logging the great southern Appalachian forest, around 1880 to 1920. Ecocriticism, in turn, reminds us to consider the material relationships between humans and nature, and can inform a critique of natural resource exploitation.

My purpose is twofold: On the one hand, I propose a fresh take on a well-known poem. On the other, I use a reading of this poem as an occasion to retell the story of the reckless clear-cutting of one of the planet's great forests. That environmental history provides the context in which the poem was composed. In that sense, I read against the spirit of the poem as obscure, modernist allegory and reread it, instead, as a kind of journalistic artifact.

But First, a Typical Reading of the Poem, with Background Information and Vocabulary Notes

We can begin by reading the poem itself. The poem is, as I've said, generally taken as an account of an aesthetic act. The first-person narrator-poet here brings order to the scene by placing a jar.

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.

William Blake, *The Ancient of Days Setting a Compass upon the Face of the Earth.* (See Proverbs, viii. 27). Frontispiece to *Europe: A Prophecy*, printed in 1794. Print colored by hand. Image from the Wikipedia article titled "Europe a Prophecy," July 2017.

Originally published in the October 1919 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, edited by Harriet Monroe in Chicago, this poem was included in *Harmonium* (1923), Stevens's first book of poems.

The poem evokes William Blake's etching of God placing a compass on the face of the waters. The compass is the *logos*, the ordering principle. So, too the jar. In this standard reading, the poem is an allegory about the ordering power of art and imagination. Yet perhaps in contrast to the Blake etching, the Stevens poem shows the ordering not as divine but rather as man-made and provisional.

In order to further elucidate the poem, it is necessary to examine a few words and phrases. The first is "anecdote." That word appears in the titles of this and four other poems collected in *Harmonium* (1923), Stevens's first book of poems. (The others are "Earthy Anecdote," "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand," "Anecdote of Canna," and "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks.") The jar poem, like these four others, does not convey an "anecdote," in the precise meaning of that term as a short conversational narrative. Rather, the poem presents an allegory. That is, the jar in the poem comes to stand in for an abstraction. So the word "anecdote" in the title is indirect, coy, perhaps comical and even self-deprecating. I take the title to be a gesture similar to the one later made by the surrealist painter, René Magritte, in his famous painting, formally titled *The Treachery of Images* (1928–29), produced ten years after Stevens first published his "Jar" poem. The Magritte painting depicts

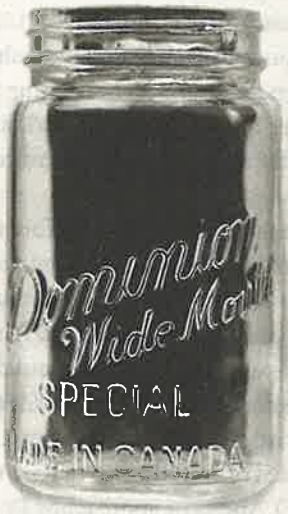
an image of a pipe, and below that image is the painted caption "this is not a pipe" (*ceci n'est pas un pipe*, in French). Stevens's title, like Magritte's caption, is a playful way of inviting readers to think twice about what they are reading.

Helen Vendler, the renowned American poetry critic and prolific Stevens commentator, has written that one rule for deciphering Stevens's work is to "mistrust titles" (44). Further, Vendler writes, "Stevens' strategies for freshness and originality are strategies of concealment, chiefly concealment of the lyric 'I'" (44). So Vendler encourages readers to investigate the "I" that has been concealed, to excavate the personal narrative underlying the obscure allegory of any given Stevens poem.

The second phrase worth discussing in the "Jar" poem is "of a port." This is an archaic term that I did not fully understand until I happened to be rereading a passage in the first chapter of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*—the "Custom House" chapter, wherein the first-person author/narrator, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," describes how he imagines his own progenitor, an ancestor from two centuries earlier, walking the streets of early Salem, Massachusetts: " . . .this grave, bearded, sable-cloaked and steeple-crowned progenitor,—who came so early, with his Bible and his sword, and trode the unworn street with such a stately port, and made so large a figure, as a man of war and peace" ("The Custom House, Introductory to 'The Scarlet Letter,'" para. 9, emphasis added). In the context of the jar poem, then, the phrase "of a port" suggests that the jar has a physical bearing, a peculiar sort of body language that one might attribute to a human being. One commentator on Stevens's poem, the poet Robert Hass, says his own grandmother was given to referring to her husband as "of a port," to describe, approvingly, his bearing and his substantial presence (Cook 68).

Wallace Stevens was a big man—six feet two inches tall and often close to three hundred pounds (his weight fluctuated over his lifetime). One of his coworkers—around the same time that Stevens wrote the "Jar" poem and visited Elizabethton, Tennessee—was Charles Beach, a young underwriter when Stevens was first hired in 1916 at the Hartford. Years later, in the 1970s, Beach recalled Stevens's demeanor and physical presence: "[Stevens] was such a big man physically that he impressed you, and you sort of stepped aside a little bit when he would come. He was a very charming man, very polished. And he conducted himself in such a way that would impress you" (interviewed August 1976, Farmington, Conn.; Brazeau 11).

So the jar on the hill can be likened to Stevens, himself, in his role as commanding insurance executive. Perhaps it reflects his view of himself as a well-dressed, important businessman, an emissary from the broader



Stock photo of a Dominion Wide Mouth Special canning jar.

world of commerce and finance, as he stepped into shabby offices to conduct business in Elizabethton, that provincial outpost on the edge of the Carter County wilderness on a spring day in 1918.

But before I get to that day, I would like to discuss a third phrase in the poem: "The jar was gray and bare." Helen Vendler and others take the gray jar to be a stone or ceramic jug. Roy Harvey Pearce, on the other hand, points to the Dominion canning jar—which was widely used as a moonshine jar. Perhaps, then, the jar was a nod to common notions about those East Tennessee hills to which Stevens's business had carried him, that spring, one hundred years ago.

Stevens in East Tennessee

Portrait of the Poet as a Traveling Surety Bond Claimsman

Did Wallace Stevens write this poem while he was in Elizabethton? Or, more likely, did he conceive it at that time and write it sometime later? The truth is I do not know where and when he wrote the poem. However, the circumstantial evidence suggests that the poem arose from his experience on his brief business trip to East Tennessee in the spring of 1918.

We do know from his letters that he was in East Tennessee in late April 1918. And the first mention of the "Jar" poem in his published letters is from

more than a year later, in August 1919. At that time, he refers—in a letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, based in Chicago—to the "Jar" poem as a "new poem." The poem was then first published, two months later, along with a group of other poems, under the heading "Pecksniffiana," in Monroe's magazine in October 1919. A year and a half seems about the length of time one might expect for a poem to go from conception and composition to print.

Stevens had visited East Tennessee at least once before 1918—on a business trip in 1905. On August 10 of that year, he rode the Southern Railway passenger train down the great valley of Virginia and through upper East Tennessee. At that time he was only passing through. His journal shows that by the next day, August 11, he was in Covington, Louisiana. Yet according to his biographer, Joan Richardson, even before he had ever seen Tennessee, something about the state had a hold on his imagination. Months before his 1905 train trip, he dreamed of standing on "a green mountain—no trees, only grass" (Richardson 218). And as he approached Tennessee through southwest Virginia, he made an evocative note in his journal: "We are approaching Tennessee—green, hilly, sunny—cloudy place" (*Letters* 83).

When he returned thirteen years later, his business took him first to Chattanooga, on Friday, April 26. The next day he worked in a Chattanooga law office for twelve hours. Then on Sunday he traveled to Knoxville, arriving in the afternoon. He could not conduct business until Monday morning, so he walked through town all afternoon. He wrote about his walk in a letter to his wife that evening: "Out near the golf club, at the Western end of the city, there is a really swank view. The Tennessee River makes a great bend through woods and cliffs and hills and on the horizon run the blue ranges of the mountains. I saw no end of irises in people's gardens. There were peonies, tulip-trees, locust trees and an unknown tree, very large and spreading, covered with purple blossoms [this last was probably the princess tree or royal Paulownia (*Paulownia tomentosa*)]" (*Letters* 207).

The next day, for reasons not explained in Stevens's letters, he traveled one hundred miles east to Johnson City and secured a room at the Colonial Hotel, downtown. The following day he rode an "auto-bus" ten miles east, to Elizabethton. At the end of the work day, he sat down and wrote a letter to his wife:

> It is about four o'clock. I must wait until five for an auto-bus back to Johnson City, about ten miles away. It rains and rains and rains. Yet they have two fountains rattling loudly in front of the hotel. I have been visiting the sourest lawyers in the shabbiest offices. One of them spoke of the contractors whose case I am handling as "a dark and black and damnable gang." . . . Here they spell Arthur, Arter, and so on. All this will give you some idea of the grandeurs of traveling in Tennessee. I noticed the other day that O. Henry, in one of his letters, asked, "Is it possible for anything to happen in Nashville?" Certainly not without outside help. This applies to the State as a whole. I have never been so concerned about a place. I begin to think of it as Pope thought of London: as a "dear, damned, distracting place." I slept last night, for instance, at the Colonial Hotel in Johnson City. The next room was separated by a warped wooden door that was an inch short at the top. Consequently, one could hear the least noise. Well, that room contained a baby, a small boy, a young man and his wife. They were from the country and I imagine did not know how to turn off the electricity. They snored and squalled all night with the light turned on full. What a nightmare it must have been for them! . . . This gives you an idea of my circumstances.
>
> With love,
> Wallace (*Letters* 208)

Though I do not know the specifics of the case, I can tell you the nature of the work that Stevens was doing in Elizabethton. In April 1918, Stevens was thirty-eight years old. He had earned his law degree when he was twenty-three, then drifted in and out of law firms, along the way acquiring a background in surety law. In 1916, the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company hired him to handle national surety operations at its home office, in Hartford, Connecticut. On April 1, 1918, the company established a separate fidelity and surety claims department, with Stevens as its head. (Stevens would hold the position until 1955, the year of his death.)

And what is surety, exactly? A surety bond guarantees that a principal will perform a contract. If the principal defaults, the surety company must step in and set things right. So a surety bond guarantees, for example, a contractor's satisfactory completion of, say, a sewer line or a road paving.

Bonding companies were new in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. As Stevens's biographer Peter Brazeau points out, by the mid-1910s bonding companies had become an indispensable part of the way capital investments were guaranteed (5). The modern world was a scary place. 1918 was a year of global warfare, not to mention the global influenza pandemic. Surety bonds helped to reassure investors and thus promoted the

flow of capital that fueled increasingly global economic activities. The bonding company executive was thus an ambassador of economic and technological modernism.

As head of Surety Claims at the Hartford in 1918, Stevens's job was to travel around the country evaluating claims, in order to decide whether and how to resolve them. For example, as one of his colleagues later explained, Stevens's job was "to check the financial position of the contractor, his assets, how far the job had progressed, what it would cost to complete the job by getting out other bids, and whether we should finance the contract to completion" (Brazeau 12).

Stevens remarked to his wife, around this time, regarding his work: "I go around to patch up trouble or else to cause it" (12).

Elizabethton 1918, in the Context of the Industrial Logging of Appalachia, ca. 1880–1920

Due to a long growing season and high rainfall, the mountains of southern Appalachia at the end of the nineteenth century held the most magnificent—and the most commercially valuable—forests in North America, and probably in the world (outside of the tropics). Beginning in the 1880s, the industrial logging of the great Appalachian forest began in earnest.

Northern and international "syndicates," or holding companies, purchased large tracts of land and logged them with relentless efficiency. Mechanized operations could reduce a stand of giant trees to an eroded hillside within a matter of weeks. In 1910, an article in the *Manufacturer's Record*, a newspaper for industrialists, reported that lumber companies gave "no thought . . . to the effect which the cutting of timber may have on the mountain regions." Slash was left where it fell, usually to dry and catch fire. Some fires would smolder for years, reducing the earth to bare rock and mineral soil. Within three decades of the onset of industrial logging in the region, by around 1910, more than 90 percent of the trees in the southern mountains had been cut.

At the time Wallace Stevens visited Elizabethton in 1918, the timber industry was the only large-scale industrial activity in town. Carter County held some of the last virgin stands of hardwood in the nation. Within six years of his visit—by 1924—the last of the great trees in Carter County, and likewise in most of Appalachia, had been felled.

With the industrial clearing of its forests, rural Appalachia became what the historian C. Vann Woodward would later call a "colonial economy," its natural and human resources exploited by outside capital, its wealth expropriated by distant corporations and financial combinations (291). Ronald Eller's 1982 book, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880–1930*, is now considered a classic work of Appalachian studies scholarship. The book has a chapter titled "The Last Great Trees," which tells the story of the logging of the region in a compelling fashion.

"Anecdote" as Allegory of Colonialization, Incorporation of Appalachia

Historian Alan Trachtenberg, in *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, published the same year (1982) as Eller's book, provides some context for understanding the industrial logging of Appalachia. Trachtenberg describes how the post-Reconstruction American economic boom of the late nineteenth century was fueled by "tightening systems of transport and communication, the spread of a market economy into all regions." The spread of transportation technologies then gave rise to new economic relationships and social arrangements, "the remaking of cultural perceptions" and "new hierarchies of control" (3–4). Trachtenberg goes further in explaining what he means by "incorporation": "If in a literal sense incorporation refers to a specific form of industrial and business organization, in a figurative sense it encompasses a more comprehensive pattern of change" (4). The rise of the modern surety business was an essential part of this pattern of change. So too, perhaps, was the rise of modernist poetry.

Thus I suggest that in Stevens's poem the first-person "I"—the gesture of placing the jar—is an allegory not only for the creative act of the poet but also for the work of the insurance man—the act of modernization, the financial colonization of the Appalachian wilderness, the imposition of capital and market systems. The jar brings the wilderness—in this case, specifically, Carter County, Tennessee—under the influence of modern "hierarchies of control."

I read the poem this way because my sight has been conditioned both by Appalachian studies and by ecocriticism. In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism broadly: "Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Further along in her discussion, she writes that "ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature." Moreover, "If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, 'Everything is connected to everything else,' we must conclude that literature does

not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact" (xix). In this spirit, in this tradition that Glotfelty calls "ecocriticism," I read the Stevens poem as a kind of artifact, as a record of the social lines of force surrounding the great drama of human interaction with, and exploitation of, the natural environment in Appalachia.

This essay is an attempt to read Stevens's poem in the context of a complex global system, as Glotfelty would have it. I do *not* claim that Stevens was consciously composing a critique of capitalist colonialization. If anything, I read *against* what may have been Stevens's intentions. Never mind that his intentions are obscure—or, rather, it is clear that his intention was to obscure his intentions. In any case, I do not see Stevens as expressing an ecological consciousness here. Rather, his lyric poem expresses the cultural relationships complicit in natural resource exploitation. On the other hand, I do not see him advocating or celebrating those relationships. I do not condemn Stevens for being the exploiter and the colonizer. Rather, I see the poem as a beautiful representation of that pattern of relationships, that complex global system. I do believe that Wallace Stevens has, perhaps unwittingly, left us an artifact that contains a record or trace of the historical meaning of the business he was conducting in East Tennessee in 1918. That trace is visible to a reader with the proper critical tools.

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