

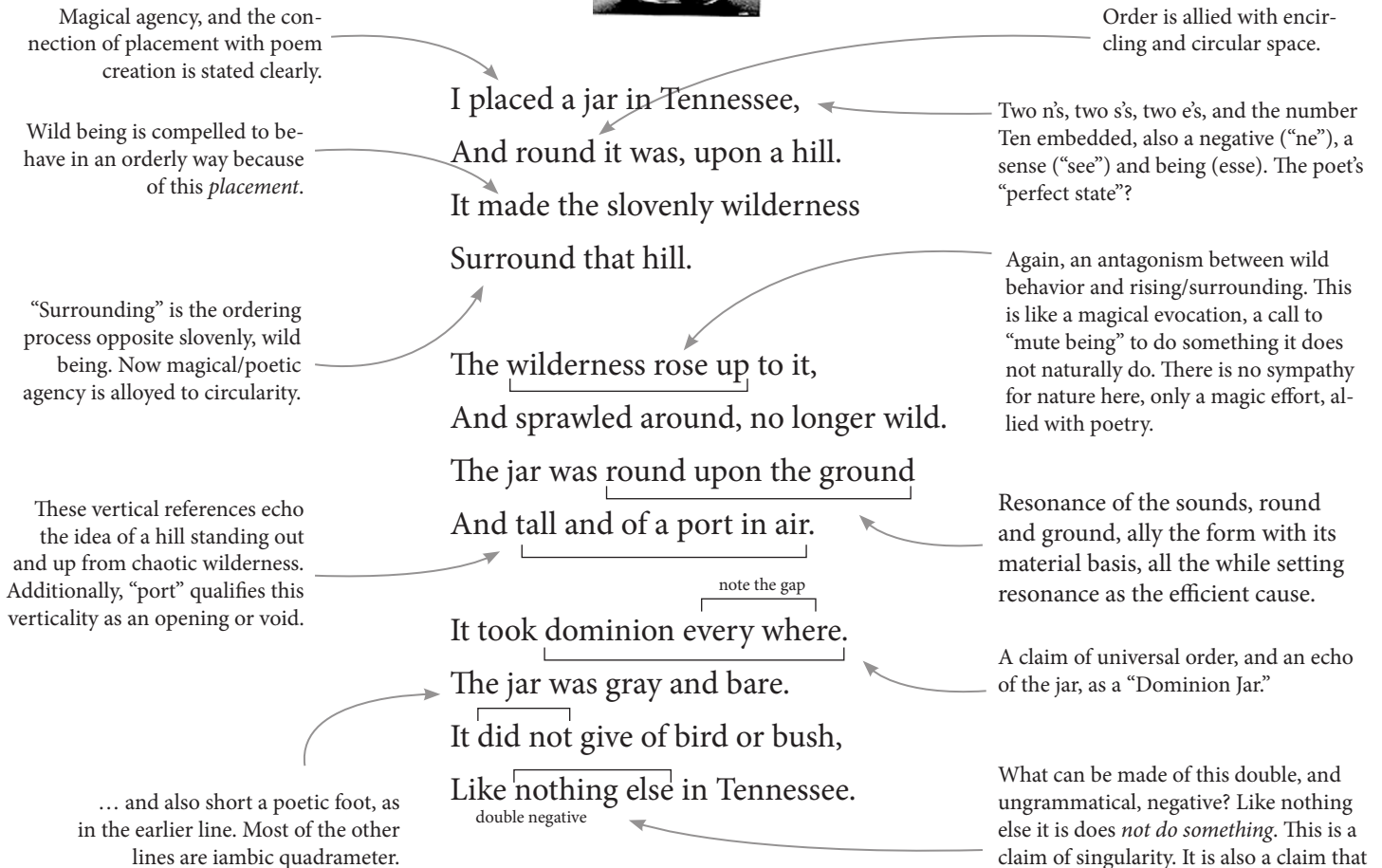
# Anecdote of the Jar

Wallace Stevens

The alleged jar that spurred Wallace Stevens' thoughts was a "Dominion Wide-Mouth Jar." Virginia is the "Dominion State," but "Tennessee" scans better. This is a case of reversed antinomasia: the name "turns out to be true." Such jars area also known as "Mason Jars."



This jar, like a poem, is a container, and in the poem Stevens does not specify that it contains anything. Rather, it is a magic jar that works through negatives and its simple shape: roundness. The roundness of a poem is its option/perogative/necessity to return to some point.



THE REVERSED PREDICATION ARGUMENT. Reversed predication is akin to topological inversion, the container is contained. The jar as object naturally does this; it is a portable reversed predication. It is place on the hill and then the hill and forest surround it. Yet, it still controls the geometry of the situation by being "tall and of a port in air." This gateway function makes the hill cosmic. It communicates with the heavens and converts the hill to the center of rule. But, it itself lacks properties. Reversed predication is the basis for the four structures of fantasy (the double, travel through time, the story in the story, and the contamination of reality by the dream); these, and the model of reversed predication, also account for four corresponding types of detached virtuality, and the jar is, if anything, a case of a "subjective object," the Lacanian partial object (organ without a body). This isolation and singularity gives rise to a radiating order, however. From separation comes a positive resonance, pitched in the negative.

THE METALEPSIS ARGUMENT. Metalepsis involves double negatives. The first is the generic negative of metonymy — its creation of "meaning effects" at a distance, through an absence. Metalepsis is sometimes called the "metonymy of metonymy," and the second negation is the isolation of the metonymy. Metalepsis is the survival of meaning despite this double negation. The isolated object nonetheless lives and generates a magic force. The jar is placed far from its accustomed location on the pantry shelf. But, this is the second negation. The first is the jar as container, which is "gray and bare" in the poem and, in everyday life, "nothing but" its properties — a transparent glass cylinder. Like Proust's jar with minnows lowered into the Vivonne River, its bareness and absences create a crystalline, i.e. a "resonant," effect.

The metalepsis, "I must get up tomorrow and get the worm," takes the animal from the metaphor, "The early bird gets the worm," and gives it an independent life. The saying need not be repeated, the worm has agency to recall the whole idea, but circulates freely. Metalepsis thus breaks the hold of metaphor as analogy. Through isolation and empowerment of the part, metalepsis attains the ability to transform world through the agency of a free-floating part. This is true of all of the forms of "detached virtuality," whose parts escape their contexts to convert alien lands.

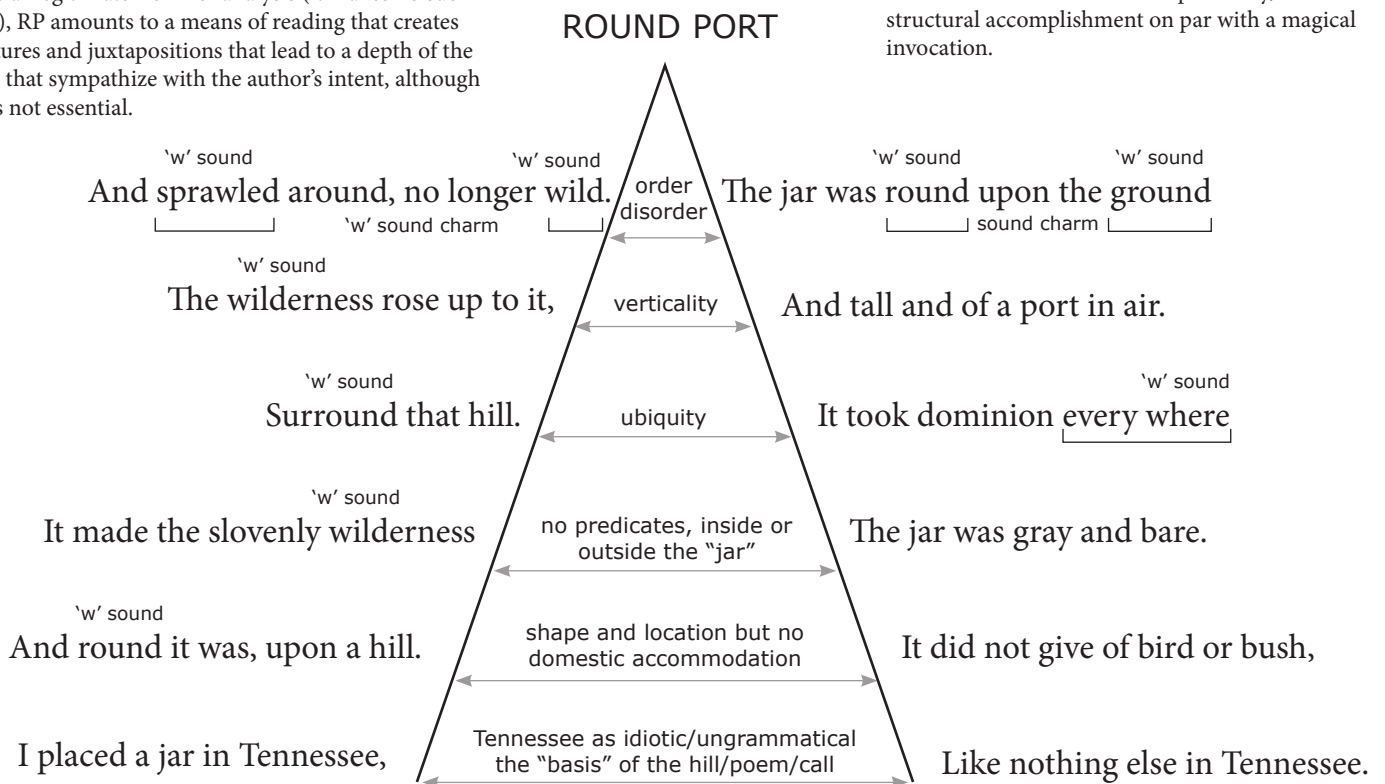
THE IDEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT. The abundant critical commentary on this poem creates an ideological *illusion*. This illusion is that the poem was written to communicate a meaning, and that commentary's job is to decipher that meaning and situate the meaning, the means to the meaning, and the sources of the meaning for a "readership," generically defined as literate if not specialized. The techniques for citing sources sometimes reveals that the readership's core is comprised of "colleagues," which is to say rivals. It would not be exaggerating to say that much literary criticism is what is known as "passive aggressive," expressing concern and open-mindedness on one hand, while exercising vengeful, ill-intended wounds on the other, often specifically targeted through the use of citations and text references. Sniping allows the writer to claim membership in the elite group of scholars who, in the Anglo-American world of literary criticism, teach and write within a privileged and protected academic environment, where employment is under some terms guaranteed and a life-style of comparative comfort contrasts with contemporaries in the labor force who may earn more but must risk more. These contextual conditions are not insignificant. They impinge on the poem, and the meaning of the poem, especially for a poet such as Wallace Stevens, who established a career in insurance to support his poetry-writing. Although not an academic, Stevens enjoyed the company of fellow poets, maintaining a life of correspondence with many of them. Stevens could be described as a electoral-politics conservative but a creative radical. His convictions about poetry were created through self-study and active experiment, but the confidence that his poems exude show that he was cautious and exacting. With poems that are as form-intense as Stevens', questions about symbolism are not effective. Stevens' had no palette, no symbolic cosmos, as did Blake; but neither did he have any literal didactic points to make, apart from poetic ones, made poetically, through abstraction. In temperament, Stevens could be compared to an alchemist or shaman who is convinced of his effectiveness through experience. Like magicians who know how tricks work in terms of how illusion is integrated into what it means to be human, Stevens saw metaphysics as a process of presentation and reception; that you could not write a poem without reading it; and that this dialectic constituted poetry's first "reversed predication," at a radical level. Therefore, as some have noted, Stevens' poems work acoustically *and* acousmatically, semantically *and* hypo-textually. And, I argue, his reversed predication sometimes takes literal diagrammatic form.

**Reversed predication analysis: chiasmic encoding.** The standard procedure is to arrange the linear order, following the poem's own clues, to find a hinge about which the text may be folded to create opposed pairs.

**"Validity."** Rather than claiming that reversed predication is a "legitimate" form of analysis (it makes no such claim), RP amounts to a means of reading that creates structures and juxtapositions that lead to a depth of the poem that sympathize with the author's intent, although that is not essential.

vertical exit  
void  
circu-lating  
identified with the poem  
organizes acousmatically  
magic invocation  
(a "call")  
inside frame

**Activation of/as the poem.** Instead of asking what the poem means, RP analysis asks what and how the poem does what it does. Various resonance models can be explored, but the simplest is the single fold. Here, Stevens gets circularity and verticality out of a single mid-point division. The proposal of chiasmus must be admitted on the grounds that the poem is about a "hill" that is just such a structure, and that Stevens' describes the hill poetically, i.e. as a structural accomplishment on par with a magical invocation.



**"Validity."** Rather than claiming that reversed predication is a "legitimate" form of analysis (it makes no such claim), RP amounts to a means of reading that creates structures and juxtapositions that lead to a depth of the poem that sympathize with the author's intent, although that is not essential. Validity relates to membership in the academic club certified by rights of publication. Reading/invocation does not use these limits but, rather, seeks the intended functionality of the poem. This functionality could be described as an entirely mental function, except that the poem constitutes a body, an embodiment, that reversely predicates any idea of abstract mental idea. The poem is the presence of the body in the mind, but also *vice versa*.