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A Poetics of Space:
Opening Up a World Through Vessel Metaphors in Modern and Contemporary Poetry

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It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements,
which determine most of our philosophical convictions.
~Richard Rorty¹

To name an object more mundane, more stunningly utilitarian or plain than a jar or a bottle would be a challenge. When we consider those things that inspire creative expressions of poetry or painting, an object like a jar or bottle will never be the first or most insistent suggestion in our thoughts. And yet, there exists a strangely consistent fascination in modern and contemporary poetry with this image. From Wallace Stevens' "jar [placed] in Tennessee," to "That vase" of Philip Larkin or James Merrill's "clear vase of dry leaves vibrating on and on," even so far back in literary history as the shapely "Grecian Urn" of John Keats' famous ode among numerous others, the genre is teeming with various forms of this kind of vessel. But why the lyrically profound focus on something so commonplace?

In beginning our efforts to answer this question, let us take a brief look at one contemporary example of a vessel as it appears in a poetic context: the vase in James Merrill's "A Renewal." This poem will prove to be one of many in which there is something extraordinary going on with this object, and where the way that it is used is, in fact, far from commonplace. Consider the poem's second and final stanza:

[...] You nod assent. Autumn turns windy, huge,
A clear vase of dry leaves vibrating on and on.
We sit, watching. When I next speak
Love buries itself in me, up to the hilt.²

¹ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980. 12.

There is a certain strangeness in the object's presence and function here. Why is it vibrating? What is the vase actually holding? What is this weirdly interconnected relationship it has to the external conditions of autumn, and how is it possible for the two to reflect each other in this way? How is the formal presence of this object influencing, or even representing, the surroundings in which it is placed? Merrill's treatment of this vase—like in other poems that also feature similar kinds of vessels—generates a plethora of questions about the effect and purpose of this kind of object in poetry, suggesting something significant about its poetic appeal. There is something about it that makes it more than just a common household object that happens to show up in many modern and contemporary poems. When treated metaphorically, the vessel opens up a world of powerful possibilities for poets to reflect on the work that they do and the relationship that poetry has to its larger, non-poetic contexts.³

The Nature of the Object-Metaphor Unlike the many other kinds of ordinary objects that poets often use as metaphors (such as mirrors, birds, etc.), vessels open up distinctive opportunities for poetic exploration because of the unique way that they engage with space. As addressed by Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar," vessels present themselves as things from somewhere else, as foreign objects that the poet is entitled to place or put down in a new context. The distinct placing of this object inside of the poem involves a particular kind of movement from the outside non-poetic world of things (the ordinary and commonplace) into the interior, representative world of the poem (the new and

² Merrill, James. "A Renewal." *James Merrill: Selected Poems*. Ed. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. 7. This volume will be henceforth referred to as *SP*.

³ This kind of vessel object will henceforth be referred to as an *object-metaphor*. By this term I mean a containing object such as a jar, bottle, vase, urn, etc. that is used as a metaphorical tool for poetic reflection (this is something that all of the poets discussed in this paper do to varying degrees).

imaginative). The linguistic apparatus of metaphor itself is a construction that inherently embodies this same kind of movement. This is because metaphor is commonly thought of as a kind of “transference...in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings.”⁴ This transfer alludes to a sort of traveling through space, wherein the poles at either end of the trajectory are what make the metaphorical transfer of meaning possible. These two poles are 1) the “thing meant,” or the underlying meaning or subject of the metaphor (known technically as the tenor), and 2) the “thing said” (the vehicle) which holds or expresses the tenor through the creation of that analogical transfer (*NPE* 1268). Consider the example of Shakespeare’s famous metaphor, “All the world’s a stage,” in which “the world” is compared to “a stage.” The former (as the thing being described) is the tenor and the latter (the thing whose attributes are being borrowed) is the vehicle. According to literary critic and poet I. A. Richards, the “special powers of poetic metaphor [can be] credited to the way the v. [vehicle] brings with it, because it derives from an aspect of experience outside of or different from the literal experience in the poem, a host of implicit associations which, although circumscribed by the t. [tenor], are never quite shut out entirely” (*NPE* 1268).

With vessel object-metaphors, these “implicit associations” involve space. Accordingly, its “special powers” come from both its nature as a metaphor that participates in this act of transference between two conceptual points, and its unique spatiality as a containing vessel that is physically characterized by outside and inside spaces (these spaces are what make it possible for such objects to hold things). For our

⁴ *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. 760. This encyclopedia will be referred to as *NPE* in all future citations.

purposes, this complex engagement with outside and inside—or exterior and interior spaces—is best described in the terms of French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard.

In his essay “The Dialectics of Outside and Inside” from *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard examines how the geometrical opposition between outside and inside—a “dialectic of division” as he calls it— shapes and restricts our experience of space. While his general focus in this book is on house and home spaces, his approach proves fruitful in framing how we think about our particular object-metaphor’s spatial relations. The dialectic of outside and inside that he describes is a harsh one, and one that he claims inhabits much of contemporary thought. “It has the sharpness of the dialectics of *yes* and *no*, which decides everything,”⁵ creating an absolutist/extremist conception of space wherein an object or concept is either in or out without any possibility for gray space or halfway. Similarly, Bachelard describes our modern obsession with circumscribing things, whereby we geometrize everything by cutting it up and dividing it into isolated spaces (i.e. outside and inside). This is how we tend to think of vessels; things or substances may locate themselves either inside or outside of a jar, and these two spaces are distinctly isolated from one another. He calls this “geometrical cancerization,” which makes “everything [take] form, even infinity” (212).⁶

For Bachelard, the geometry implicit in this understanding of space has far more severe consequences than just the creation of (albeit inaccurate) spatial distinctions. With such a strong characterization as “geometrical *cancerization*” [emphasis added] alluding

⁵ Bachelard, Gaston. “The Dialectics of Outside and Inside.” *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. 211. All further citations of Bachelard in this essay will refer to this edition.

⁶ Bachelard goes so far as to describe the characteristics that are commonly ascribed to inner and outer spaces, i.e. the inside is limited and concrete vs. the vast and unlimited outside. He claims that philosophers geometricize in this same extreme way when they think in terms of being and non-being, which roots metaphysics in this same oppositional spatiality.

to an infectious invasion, Bachelard expresses a potent disapproval of such dialectics. This is because “The dialectics of outside and inside is supported by a reinforced geometricism, in which limits are barriers” (215). Bachelard claims that this absolutist geometrism is far too restrictive and thus must be abandoned: “We must be free as regards all *definitive* intuitions—and geometrism records definitive intuitions” (215). And so, rather than following the philosophical trend of adhering to such a strict dialectic, we must take the “lesson in philosophy the poet gives us” (217). For Bachelard this means “follow[ing] the daring of poets...who invite us to the finesses of experience of intimacy [between outside and inside], to ‘escapades’ of imagination” (215).

In identifying the geometricized division between outside and inside and choosing instead to follow the example of poets who “experience...intimacy” between the two spaces, Bachelard frames an alternative way in which we can think about how our object-metaphor is involved with space. We will scrutinize this concept much more deeply throughout our work in this paper. For the moment, however, we should note that by rejecting geometrism in favor of an intimate connectedness, Bachelard’s theory opens up the possibility for there to be connected movement between the outside and inside spaces that constitute the vessel object-metaphor, rather than seeing said spaces as wholly separate and disjointed. Recognizing this nuanced spatial dynamic allows readers to uncover the way in which poets use this object-metaphor to accomplish something otherwise impossible.

Before clarifying this further, let us step back for a moment and examine the notion of *opening up*, as Bachelard himself employs it: “language bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed. Through *meaning* it encloses, while through poetic

expression, it opens up” (222). Coincidentally, this is the same terminology that German philosopher Martin Heidegger uses when talking about the possibilities of poetry:

Poetry...is no aimless of whimsicalities, and no flight of mere representations and fancies into the unreal. What poetry, as clearing projection, unfolds of unconcealment and projects into the rift within the figure is the open; poetry allows this to happen in such a way, indeed, that now, for the first time, in the midst of beings, it brings them to shine and sound.⁷

Poetry, for Heidegger, is more than merely “a frivolous mooning and vaporizing into the unknown, and a flight into dreamland,” as he similarly articulates in his essay “...Poetically Man Dwells...”⁸ Rather, poetry accomplishes something unique; it “open[s]” up a world in which entities show up meaningfully and intelligibly for us, where they are “[brought] to shine and sound” for the very first time so that we may notice their true natures or essences.⁹ Heidegger even goes so far as to say that “All

⁷ “The Origin of the Work of Art.” *Off the Beaten Track*. Ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 45.

⁸ This essay can be found in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1971. 211. This volume will henceforth be referred to as *PLT*.

⁹ This is something that Heidegger explicates much more thoroughly in relation to *art* in general—by which he refers to something that is more than an object, but rather, something that we do, an activity or a process that we engage in. In fact, this “show[ing] up” or disclosing of “the being of entities” is something that is impossible without art. Furthermore, the way that Heidegger’s means many of his terms here—including but not limited to ones such as *world*, *being*, and *entity*—are exceedingly particular and complex. By “world,” for example, he means “not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there...The *world worlds*, and it more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home...Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds...The peasant woman, on the other hand, has a world because she dwells in the overtness of beings, of the things that are. Her equipment, in its reliability, gives to this world a necessity and nearness of its own. By the opening up of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits” (*Ibid.* 43-44). My borrowing of Heidegger’s terms throughout the formulation of this paper is done with the intent of their being used with greater flexibility and forgiveness than he allows. It is for this reason that I do not spend more time defining such terms in the detail that they require when used in the context of Heidegger’s own philosophical undertakings.

art...is, in essence, poetry....From out of the poeticizing essence of truth it happens that an open place is thrown open, a place in which everything is other than what it was.”¹⁰

In thinking about both Bachelard and Heidegger’s use of the term “open” to describe the possibilities of poetry, it begins to make sense why numerous modern and contemporary poets employ vessel object-metaphors in their work. The kinetic act of opening is not only representative of the way in which poetry reveals its subjects in new ways, but is also a literal representation of the way in which vessels move in space. That is to say, vessels can be opened (or shut) in order to gain access to (or close off) their interior spaces and whatever is contained there.¹¹ Because of its nature as an object that can be physically opened up, as well as its formal identity as a device of poetic expression that opens up meaning, the vessel object-metaphor permits the opening up of a world in which things become intelligible for us in new ways. Just as science opens up a world where atoms show up and are used to help us get at the question of being,¹² so can our object-metaphor disclose poetic words in which we can get at the much debated question of whether or not the poetic is related to any non-poetic reality, and/or how an interior subjective life is connected to its external objective world. Answering these questions begins with imagining a world in which outside and inside spaces are closely intersecting and imaginatively interrelating, which Merrill, Stevens, Larkin, and Keats all do to varying degrees in their respective uses of our vessel object-metaphor.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 44

¹¹ I think here, for instance, of a cookie jar. We can open or close the lid of the jar depending on whether or not we want a cookie. We seal off its interior space to keep the cookies fresh, or open it up to share with our friends. Both possibilities are inherently available in this kind of object.

¹² Scientific discoveries bring to light new entities in the world; before certain discoveries in physics, we lived in a world in which atoms did not “show up.” So, science disclosed atoms as entities in the world.

A Case Study Before we delve into closer reading of the modern and contemporary poetic works that engage with vessels as metaphors, let us take a moment to first examine a surprising instance of a vessel that is used in much the same way, even while it resides outside the realm of the literary. This will give us an introductory understanding of how the object-metaphor can be used to help poets think critically about their own work, which will prove useful as we begin our investigative project. Coincidentally, this vessel object-metaphor is found in one of the most critical texts in 20th century philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.¹³ In this book, he makes the famous proclamation: "What is your aim in philosophy? To shew the fly the way out of the fly bottle."¹⁴

Here is a blatant instance of a vessel image, namely a fly bottle, employed metaphorically by Wittgenstein to articulate something that would otherwise be much more difficult, if not impossible. He uses the fly bottle metaphor to talk about the very foundation of his work as a philosopher. It is surprising that Wittgenstein makes use of a linguistic device commonly categorized as a purely literary phenomenon to do this rather than a philosophical or logical one, as would be expected in this kind of writing. His "aim" in practicing philosophy is to somehow "shew" us out of our inherent state of existing and functioning completely within language. Language is the inevitable vehicle of thought; it is the tool that allows us to make sense of the world around us. There is no

¹³ Strangely enough, Wittgenstein is not the only philosopher who uses this kind of vessel in his work. Martin Heidegger also centers his 1949 essay, "The Thing" (also found in *Poetry, Language, Thought*), around a jug. This is evidence for the fact that there is something special going on with this kind of object, as the consistent obsession with it extends beyond the literary into the discipline of philosophy.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1953. § 309.

way to break outside of it while still thinking about the world in an organized way. This is because the thinking human being is, according to Wittgenstein, a “fly [trapped inside the] fly bottle.” We are flies, always buzzing around within the bounds of our human-made linguistic system. But “shew” here does not imply that the philosopher aims to escape language altogether—of course that would be impossible. Rather, it suggests that our goal is to re-conceptualize how we think about the connection between thought and language so that we may more objectively understand our relationship to it. Put perhaps more simply, the purpose of philosophy is to extricate us from our linguistic limitations—from the fly bottle—to the extent that is possible as we continue to operate within language.

The metaphor of the fly bottle is the tool that allows Wittgenstein to reflect on the human relationship to language, and thus, on his objective as a philosopher of language. By seeing ourselves as flies stuck within this metaphorical fly bottle of language we are able to conceptually position ourselves outside of it (even while, realistically, we are still functioning and maneuvering completely within it). In this way, Wittgenstein’s metaphor opens up the possibility for a sort of movement between the contained interior space of language and an external outside-of-language space that we would otherwise never encounter. The philosopher’s use of metaphor here illuminates something essential about our own inquiries. There is a blatantly analogous relationship between his approach and the way that poets use vessel object-metaphors to reflect on their own projects. Just as the fly bottle metaphor provides Wittgenstein a means of expanding the limits of language while still working within its bounds, vessel object-metaphors allow poets the opportunity to think critically about the nature of their work while staying within the

bounds of their medium. We will investigate how and why this is possible as we delve further into the various poetic instances of this kind of work.

The Approach While this project is undeniably literary in terms of its inquiries and motivations, our approach to understanding the role of the vessel object-metaphor has thus far been primarily philosophical in nature. This is because the two disciplines are inevitably and inextricably tied when it comes to the study of metaphor. As literary critic Charles Altieri explains in the opening of his 1983 article on Wallace Stevens,

...Metaphor exemplifies the complex properties of duplicity that allow us to suspend meanings, operate on several levels of discourse at once, to hear the play of our desires resonate from within our descriptions. Given this complexity, it may be the case that an adequate account of metaphor must itself be metaphoric. Then, in this area at least, philosophy must ultimately take poetic form.¹⁵

The tremendous complexity of metaphor necessitates that this project straddle the line between the disciplines of literature and philosophy. Our account of metaphor will “itself be metaphoric” as we engage in a close analysis of the various instances of vessels in several modern and contemporary poems. More specifically, our analyses will reflect the spatial trajectory of the object-metaphor itself, examining the three main topographical components that constitute all vessels. These physical elements, also the three sections of this paper, are 1) the vessel’s contained interior space, 2) the realm surrounding or exterior to the object, and 3) its creatively constructed surface which functions as the physical boundary between the other two spaces. As each poet focuses primarily on one spatial component versus another, they reveal different things about the nuanced relationship between poetry and a non-poetic reality on the one hand, and between an

¹⁵ Altieri, Charles. “Wallace Stevens’ Metaphors Of Metaphor: Poetry As Theory.” *Amer. Poetry* 1.1 (1983): 27-48.

interior subjective life and an external objective world on the other. And so, the shape of this paper is a similar sort of engagement with space as the poetic instances of the metaphor themselves. This will help us get at the question of what the object-metaphor accomplishes for the poets who employ it.

Our account of the vessel object-metaphor will be philosophical in that it follows the phenomenological tradition of both Bachelard and Heidegger. Phenomenology is a “philosophy of experience,” wherein the “task of the philosopher...is to describe the structures of experience, in particular consciousness, the imagination, relations with other persons, and the situatedness of the human subject in society and history.”¹⁶ Because this branch of philosophy is interested in describing subjective states and imaginative experience, the literary (particularly the poetic, which is assumed to harbor a unique capacity to express the subjective and the imaginative) becomes a legitimate point of entry into this kind of study:

[The phenomenologist] takes the image just as it is, just as the poet created it, and tries to make it his own, to feed on this rare fruit. He brings the image to the very limit of what he is able to imagine. However far from being a poet he himself may be, he tries to repeat its creation for himself and, if possible, continue its exaggeration. (Bachelard 227)

In this sense, our approach is precisely a phenomenological one. We will ground ourselves in each literary instance of the vessel object-metaphor “just as the poet created it,” and then imaginatively extend the metaphorical meaning of each to bring the image to its “limit.” This will allow us to consider the vessel object-metaphor as more than just an aesthetic character of the poem’s language or a simple household object. Instead, following poets into the imaginative metaphorical domain in which they work and then

¹⁶ *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. Ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. 731.

examining the vessel object-metaphor's relationship to space as something that "disclose[s] aspects of the being of humans and their worlds"¹⁷ will open up new possibilities for our understanding of poetry. The way the object-metaphor is treated in these poems will guide us in thinking critically about how different kinds of exterior and interior spaces interact with one another and what that means for both poets and readers. This will compel us to reflect on a larger human reality that extends beyond the contained realm of the purely poetic. And so, the boundary between literature and philosophy overlaps in a way that makes a phenomenological method perhaps the only viable one for this project.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* This is one of several ways in which phenomenological theories of literature regard works of art.

CHAPTER ONE: The Interior

Often it is from the very fact of concentration in the most restricted intimate space that the dialectics of inside and outside draws its strength.

~Gaston Bachelard (229)

For Martin Heidegger, vessels are defined by their interior space, what he calls the void: “The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel’s holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug *is* as the holding vessel.” (*PLT* 167) This interior void is actually or potentially filled, which gives it a distinctive sort of potential—a holding potential. Whether the object is full of wine, water, ashes in the case of an urn, or simply air, its inherent potential for containment in this interior cavity is what gives it its identity and purpose as a vessel, actually making the object into what it is.

The fact that vessels carry with them this intrinsic element of interiority is the reason that many poets make such prolific metaphorical use of it. The vessel’s interior space—the space the Heidegger refers to as “the emptiness, the void”—is extremely useful because of its ability to hold something external to it. For contemporary confessional poets such as James Merrill, this interior void becomes a space in which they can project, and thus contain, their deeply subjective experiences. This act of containment opens up two new possibilities for them: 1) it allows the poet (and/or speaker) to scrutinize their subjective experiences much more closely by gaining some distance from them and 2) helps them to control, or at the very least come to terms with, a complex emotional interior that is otherwise chaotic or overwhelming. In this sense, the poem itself becomes a structure for holding some deeper internal reality or emotional state.

The vessel object-metaphor is able to open up such possibilities for poets by virtue of the fact that its inside space is in close relation with all that is external to it. The poet/speaker is able to take command of their private subjective life by imagining that it is directly related to an objective, exterior world that is larger and more stable. This is something that James Merrill demonstrates poignantly in “A Renewal.” Through his use of the “clear vase,” the interiority of the speaker is placed in direct correspondence with the larger natural reality of autumn. He does this by drawing the curtain closed on the possibility of a truly external world, as the outside world becomes a mere feature of a very personal, very vulnerable and emotional interior. This is how he is able to quell his impassioned distress, and how we as readers are able to experience a world in which a personal interior reality is closely connected to an external, natural one. The formalist nature of Merrill’s work provides a lens through which to more thoroughly examine the nuances of this relationship.

“A Renewal” is very clearly a poem about the speaker’s (and/or poet’s) tumultuous internal life, more specifically, about his attachment to an overwhelmingly passionate yet fraught romantic situation [here quoted in full]:

Having used every subterfuge
To shake you, lies, fatigue, or even that of passion,
Now I see no way but a clean break.
I add that I am willing to bear the guilt.

You nod assent. Autumn turns windy, huge,
A clear vase of dry leaves vibrating on and on.
We sit, watching. When I next speak
Love buries itself in me, up to the hilt.

(SP 7)

This poem is a very intimate, personal account of passion and loss. Not only does the speaker put his innermost thoughts on display for readers, but he brings us directly into

his subjective world with the use of “you.” While he uses this second person address to speak directly to his lover and expresses his deep distress about their relationship, it has the effect of placing readers in the position of that lover themselves, to witness the speaker’s heavy address firsthand. There is an almost overwhelming sense of helplessness and exhaustion that permeates the speaker’s emotional state in this address. Having unsuccessfully attempted various approaches to get the attention of his lover—namely deceit, weakness, and even strong emotion—he has tired all possibilities, and so is left with nothing left to do but end the relationship, to make a “clean break.”

Alternatively, “to shake you” could refer to the speaker’s desire to rid himself of his lover and his feelings for him. Both interpretations here sustain the need for a “clean break” from the lover. This is the peak of the speaker’s emotional helplessness in this relationship.

The “clean break” that must be made between the two lovers is the center of the inner turbulence of this poem. With the word “break,” the speaker hints at a certain violence that is underlying throughout the poem; there is a sudden snap or a severing that needs to occur between the two lovers that the speaker must be responsible for. This becomes the source (albeit willingly) of great guilt for him. And while this split is a violent one—it is a “break” rather than a more gently phrased separation or parting of ways— it is also a “clean” one. That is to say, it is one done with little confusion, complication, or messiness. This is mimicked by the formal structure of the poem here; the line break between the two stanzas provides a small separation between the two characters, even an implied moment of silence for the lover to process what has happened before responding as he does at the start of the second stanza. Only after the formal break

does the lover react. In this sense, the two characters (and thus the relationship) are already separated from one another in the physical form of the poem. This formal “clean break” between the two characters also mimics the clear emotional distance between their experiences and the way they express their innermost thoughts. The lover answers the speaker silently, rather than fighting him or even verbally protesting at all; he merely “nod[s] assent.” This relatively easy accession of the lover in the opening of the second quatrain is quite disparate from the vulnerable, desperate, guilt-ridden, and revelatory expression of the speaker in the first.

The emotional turmoil that the speaker is experiencing in this poem is so heavy, overwhelming, and impassioned that it overflows beyond his own private, internal space. As Charles Altieri claims, “Strong poets make the world as an extension of their emotional energies,” (34) and this is precisely what Merrill accomplishes here. He does this by bringing the surrounding natural environment into the poem in the second quatrain, where it becomes clear that there is something extraordinary about it:

“...Autumn turns windy, huge, / A clear vase of dry leaves vibrating on and on. / We sit, watching.”¹⁸ This is the first time in the poem that an external background is revealed: that of autumn. This is not just a clarification of the seasonal conditions surrounding the speaker, however. Rather, this external world is a reflection of the speaker’s emotional life. We know this because autumn changes the moment the emotional state of the speaker changes; the “turn[ing]” of autumn happens right after the lover “nod[s] assent,”

¹⁸ These lines are wonderfully reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’ “Domination of Black,” in which “...the leaves themselves / [Turn] in the wind” as the words “leaves,” “wind,” and variations of the verb “turn” are repeated throughout the thirty six lines. Because of Merrill’s known interest in Stevens, this connection would be an intriguing opening for further investigation, one that unfortunately goes beyond the scope of this paper. “Domination of Black” can be found in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*. Ed. John N. Serio. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. 6.

which assumedly sparks some sort of affective shift or reaction in the speaker. This reaction, which may be the extreme realization or acceptance of his now altered romantic situation, is the very cause of this shift in the weather. The verb “turns” evokes the causal nature of this change as well, implying that it is not an uncontrollable or seasonal pattern that makes this occur. This makes the very idea of an objective external world an impossibility, and so the outside world becomes a mere feature of the speaker’s interior.

By crafting such a subjectively contingent relationship between the speaker’s emotional experience and the external conditions of autumn, Merrill is speaking to Bachelard’s claim that,

Outside and inside are both intimate—they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility. If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides...Intimate space loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void, void being the raw material of possibility of being. (218)

In other words, Merrill is suggesting that affective interior worlds and environmental exterior spaces are not separate, distinct spaces that co-exist next to one another, as we are used to thinking. Rather, they are deeply intertwined and even dependent spaces. Bachelard’s use of the word “intimate”¹⁹ here is particularly fitting. In “A Renewal,” the interior emotional life of the speaker is of the most intimate nature, as it is tied to his romantic life. And thus, the outside world (i.e. autumn) also takes on a concomitant sort of intimacy. However, the intimacy that both realms share also harbors a certain “hostility”; between the overbearing “huge[ness]” of autumn and the clean but violently severe “break” between lovers, there is an undeniable sense of “[pain] on both sides.” It

¹⁹ According to Oxford English Dictionary (OED), “intimate” means “pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding from, concerning, or affecting one’s inmost self; closely personal.” Thus, “intimate space” is used interchangeably with the notion of “interior space,” saying something about the fundamental nature of interiority.

is in this pain that "...the two spaces of inside and outside exchange their dizziness"
(Bachelard 221).

The fusing together of outside and inside spaces in this poem is facilitated by the object-metaphor of the "clear vase of dry leaves vibrating on and on." Merrill does this by dissolving the boundary that exists between the two. This is represented by the physical boundary of the vase (more specifically, the walls of that vase) that separates its inner and outer spaces. By making them "clear," the separation disappears entirely, allowing outside and inside worlds to merge together and exchange their contents, or their "dizziness." And these contents are in fact dizzy: the dry leaves *vibrate* within the vase, perpetuating this sense of agitated movement. Contained in this object-metaphor is a strange sort of encrypted vitality; despite its dryness, it is vibrating "on and on" of some extraordinary force. This serves as a metaphorical representation of the intense emotion that is contained in the speaker's body and mind, one that is so strong, so present and overwhelming to him that it trembles (seemingly) indefinitely. But because this vibrating emotional energy is contained within the metaphorical vessel of autumn, there are several possibilities opened up for the speaker.

Because the speaker is able to contain his agitated internal experience, he is able to deal with it quite differently than would otherwise be the case. By projecting the almost violent emotion that he feels inside outward onto nature, and containing that nature in the vase, allows him to gain some amount of distance from it. Rather than being described as "vibrating" or shaking himself, the speaker instead is able to "sit, watching" as the leaves tremble in his place. There is an implied moment of silence after the period in the middle of the line, "We sit, watching. When I next speak..." wherein the speaker

seems to be contemplating, observing, and even scrutinizing his vacillating interior as it moves in front of him. In this sense, the speaker “watch[es]” as his own tumultuous inner state becomes, quite literally, an *object* that he can study as he sits transfixed by love.²⁰ This seems to lessen the extreme helplessness that the speaker is experiencing in the poem. By allowing the “windy, huge” autumnal exterior into his inner world and making it a feature of that interior, he is able to control it. This calms his own emotional burden, at least to the point that he may “sit” next to his lover without being completely consumed by what he is feeling in that instant.

The speaker attempts to take action in the last sentence of the poem, and as a result, the “clear vase” is no longer able to contain his passions: the moment he “next speak[s] / Love buries itself in [him], up to the hilt.” With the absence of the “clear vase,” the scene feels suddenly bleak for the speaker who is once again overwhelmed by a much more violent passion, even an eroticism. His interior is now filled completely by “love,” but a love that is not welcome. “Buries” implies an eternally permanent and heavy, death-filled fullness which makes his inner space feel desolate, rather than full of the vibrating vitality that filled it previously. Furthermore, the fact that love fills the speaker “up to the hilt,” suggests that he must be armed against it, again emphasizing a violent quality. The speaker is no longer connected to the freeing external world of autumn but rather,

²⁰ In this same way, the vase may also be used as a larger metaphor for poetry itself. If we think of a poem as a similar sort of object that contains a kind of subjective/artistic/expressive (poetic) interior, the poet can gain a little distance from that space in which they work, in the same way that the speaker of “A Renewal” does. This allows the poet to scrutinize and deliberate on their medium, even as they operate and express themselves within it. It is in this sense that the poem itself operates as a structure of holding prior to any movement towards interpretation. A number of potential questions arise here, such as the extent to which language contains meaning prior to interpretation by the reader, of the possibility of self-evidence or complete transparency in poetry, and where and how the intentions of the poet come into play in all of this, among many others. These are all important questions worth considering more thoroughly both in analyzing this poem, and in thinking about literary study more generally.

dragged down into the immobilized and isolated internal world that is wholly burdened by love and bodily desire.

“A Renewal” provides a poignant account of one way in which Merrill defines the relationship between an interior subjective life and an external objective world. For him, interior and exterior spaces are in direct correspondence with one another, or as Bachelard would say, “Space is nothing but a ‘horrible outside-inside.’” (218) In “A Renewal,” Merrill asserts this interrelated and “horrible outside-inside” through the metaphorical content of the poem. Yet, as a poet who is frequently recognized for his formalist tendencies, he treats interiority and exteriority quite differently in poems such as “An Upward Look.” This is a poem where Merrill is once again conscious of space, and seems to be asserting a similar message about the interchangeability of interior and exterior. But rather than using a vessel object-metaphor as he does in “A Renewal,” he explores these spaces through a more blatantly formal approach. “An Upward Look” serves as a structural illustration of outside and inside spaces and their interrelatedness, which brings to light the vessel object-metaphor’s engagement with space in an unusual and extremely fruitful way even without commenting on it directly [here quoted in full]:

O heart green acre	sown with salt
by the departing	occupier
lay down your gallant	spears of wheat
Salt of the earth	each stellar pinch
flung in blind	defiance backwards
now takes its toll	Up from his quieted
quarry the lover	colder and wiser
hauling himself	finds the world turning

toys triumphs	toxins into
this vast facility	the living come
dearest to die in	How did it happen
In bright alternation	minutely mirrored
within the thinking	of each and every
mortal creature	halves of a clue
approach the earthlights	Morning star
evening star	salt of the sky
First the grave	dissolving into dawn
then the crucial	recrystallizing
from inmost depths	of clear dark blue
(SP 255)	

Before delving into the formal accomplishments of the poem, let us take a brief look at the image of “the earthlights...[that] dissolv[e] into dawn.” While “An Upward Look” is a goldmine of metaphors that each warrant thorough attention for both their naked beauty and phenomenological implications, this particular image brings interior and exterior worlds into focus in relation to one other in a particularly unique way for us. Here, the speaker of the poem gazes “upward” at the stars, and the sky leans down to return his stare through an intermediary “earthlight.” The term “earthlight” functions as an inverse of the more common term *skylight*. Here, the sky is the personified body—it mirrors the “thinking...of each and every / mortal creature” that looks down at earth, rather than vice versa as is normally the case. And so there is a reversal of perspectives, a swapping of what is typically considered inside and what is outside and who does the looking “upward” from each one of these spaces.²¹ And yet, this movement is not *merely*

²¹ Conceiving of inside/outside spaces in relation to an “earthlight” is much more subtle than with a vessel object. A vase like the one in “A Renewal” has a very clearly established interior and exterior; it has an inner void that is distinctively separated from the space surrounding it. Contrarily, an “earthlight” is a flat object that merely has two sides, and necessitates only that an observer look from one side, through the glass window to the other. While the interior is normally assumed to be the side from which the observer looks, this does not necessarily have to be the case. It is for this reason that this object works so well in this

a reversal of inside and outside spaces, but also a unification of the two. Both “halves of a clue”—the realm of the human/the earthly (typically situated as the interior) and that of the sky and the universe beyond (the exterior)—move towards one another, colliding at the window-like image of the “earthlight.” In this sense, the two spaces personified lean in to meet one another and “exchange their dizziness,” once again in Bachelard’s terms. Merrill goes even further in fusing these realms together through the image of the “salt of the sky,” or the stars. He introduces “morning star / evening star,” which are actually, astronomically speaking, the same entity. This is represented by their simultaneous dissolving into the lightness of “dawn,” where they become one with the sun. Conversely, Merrill also paints a picture of their rebirth at nightfall, wherein the star’s exterior is reclaimed by means of an interior quality. This quality is blueness: “...the crucial...recrystallizing / from the inmost depths...of clear dark blue.” It is this exchange of interiority and exteriority that make this natural cycle possible, and it is the “earthlight” image that epitomizes and facilitates this exchange. While an “earthlight” is not a vessel like the vase in “A Renewal” is, the qualities that it shares with that vase are the very reason that it can make manifest a similar exchange between its opposing spaces. Just as the “clear vase” is transparent which allows for the boundary between interior and exterior spaces to disappear, the earthlight is assumedly also made of a clear glass (because it is an inversion of a skylight, which is made of this material). This allows the barrier to be penetrated in much the same way.

poem—the poet is reformulating how we think about these two sides, about inside and outside spaces. Accordingly, a reader can now imaginatively insert her/himself at the point of either perspective—on the side of the earth or the sky. In this way, Merrill’s conceptions of interior and exterior can be explored more thoroughly and flexibly than they can with the vase image. It is for this reason that the “earthlight” is so helpful in our discussion of the spatial characteristics of the vase object-metaphor.

In addition to the intricate dialectic of outside/inside that is crafted through the “earthlight” image, Merrill makes use of the formal structure of the poem to bring interior and exterior worlds in on one another. There is a large cavity of empty space that runs down through the physical center of the poem, breaking the nine stanzas in half lengthwise. The participation of this substantial space is quite striking, as it functions in two potential ways. Firstly, it can be thought of as a literal demonstration of the clear “earthlight” boundary that delineates one realm of space from its opposite, here the left half of the poem from the right in place of earthly/human from sky/universe, or inside from outside. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as the interior void that is characteristic of any vessel like the “clear vase” in his other poem. In both cases, this gap presents itself as a graphic representation of a greater challenge—what do we make of this kind of internal void? Is it a lacking or, contrarily, a sum of the poem’s caesuras? Is it a space onto which the reader can project a thought or feeling, or where the speaker’s voice resonates the loudest? And how does this function as this kind of ‘internal’ space if its structural nature most commonly characterizes it as an external, formal quality of the poem? These are just some of the questions that “An Upward Look” poses. While Merrill avoids answering them directly, the presence of this kind of ambiguous internal gap and the questions with which readers are forced to engage makes an important point about internal poetic space: that it is not so clearly distinct from its opposite exterior space.

It is the imaginative unanswered-ness of Merrill’s work that opens up the possibility for a more nuanced “inception” of interiority and exteriority, or inside and outside. As Bachelard explains,

Inside and outside, as experienced by the imagination, can no longer be taken in their simple reciprocity; consequently, by omitting geometrical

references when we speak of the first expressions of being, by choosing more concrete, more phenomenologically exact inceptions²², we shall come to realize that the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances. (Bachelard 216)

It is for this reason that we now turn our attention to poets who focus on more external perspectives of space with regards to our vessel object-metaphor. In doing so, as we have done similarly in examining the internally oriented spaces in Merrill's two poems, we will find "that the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances."²³

²² Notice Bachelard's use of *inception* here as opposed to *conception*. According to the OED, *inception* refers to "the action of entering upon some undertaking, process, or stage of existence; origination, beginning, commencement" versus *conception* which is "the action or faculty of conceiving in the mind, or of forming an idea or notion of anything." There is an implied sense of *interior* or inner origin with the former, which is inherent in any phenomenological study of imaginative expression, i.e. poetry.

²³ A larger inquiry into the concept of interiority in poetry might also look at T. S. Eliot's "Chinese jar [that]... / Moves perpetually in its stillness." in section V of "Burnt Norton"; Wallace Stevens' "bowl of white...cold porcelain, low and round" in "The Poems of Our Climate"; the "lone, chipped vessel...[that] / Fills for you with something warm and clear" in Merrill's "Willowware Cup"; and the "hexahedrons of wood and glass" of artist Joseph Cornell in Elizabeth Bishop's "Objects and Apparitions."

CHAPTER TWO: The Exterior

Sometimes, it is in being outside itself that being tests consistencies.
Sometimes, too, it is closed in, as it were, on the outside.
~Gaston Bachelard (215)

As we have already begun to discover, vessels are unique for poets as metaphorical tools because of the way they engage with space. For a poet whose focus flows from the deeply internalized space inside the vase like Merrill in “A Renewal,” bringing the external world of autumn into that subjective interior is a way of gaining some small amount of control to help him come to terms with his inner angst, at least temporarily. There are a number of poets, however, who situate themselves quite differently in relation to similar vessel objects. These are instances like the jar in Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” and the vase in Philip Larkin’s “Home is so Sad,” where the perspective of each speaker seems to be stationed in the environment surrounding, or external to, their respective vessels rather than inside of them.²⁴ This kind of external orientation to the object-metaphor provides a vastly different way of examining its complicated relationship to space.

While Stevens’ and Larkin’s poems do not focus on direct impressions of the objects’ interior space or the holding potential that was so important to Merrill, their attention to a more external perspective gives us an essential key into understanding that interior more thoroughly. This is because each poem makes subtle movements towards an

²⁴ This is made possible by the fundamental difference between Merrill’s vase vs. the vase and jar of Larkin and Stevens: the latter are depictions of actual objects—meaning, they describe a plain jar and a vase that are meant to be taken, at least initially, as literal—whereas Merrill’s vase is a metaphorical containing vessel. That is to say, autumn does not become an actual vase in the poem, but is a symbolic representation of the narrator’s inner life and/or an embodiment of the new connection between that life and the narrator’s environment. This naturally places the perspective of Merrill’s speaker in the interior realm of the object.

implied but invisible interiority within its external realm. Once again, this intimate interrelatedness of outside and inside spaces opens up a new possibility for the speaker (and/or the poet), namely, to find a place for their interior subjective lives within a non-poetic, non-subjective external world. For Stevens, this means asserting a certain aspect of individual agency over the natural wilderness, while for Larkin, it means reconciling the damaged, nostalgic exterior of his house with a deep, inexpressible interior experience of home. This is all made possible vis-à-vis our vessel object-metaphor.

With a title like “Anecdote of the Jar,” one might expect the focus of this poem to settle predominantly on describing the jar itself, as is the case with John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”²⁵ Instead, Stevens concentrates on the object’s relation to its surrounding environment. This allows him to emphasize the intricate way in which the object-metaphor is related to the space in which it is placed. He crafts a world in which there is an infectious connection between the vessel and the landscape that surrounds it, wherein wilderness is altered and even reoriented by the presence of the man-made 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.

²⁵ These two poems are commonly grouped together in the much of scholarship written about them; some even go so far as to argue that Stevens’ poem is a commentary on Keats’. Both titles emphasize the central role that the vessel object-metaphor plays in each poem, and yet, the focus of each is entirely different. We will look at “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in the next chapter of this paper.

The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.²⁶

The landscape surrounding the jar is given very few precise identifying features. Other than the fact that it is located in Tennessee, the speaker describes little else; simply, there is a “hill” present and its surroundings embody a sort of “wilderness.” That this wilderness is described as “slovenly” and that it “sprawl[s]” reveal that this is a kind of nature that is beyond the reach of civilization and is thus free to grow without being manicured or cultivated.²⁷ That is, until the jar gets “placed...upon [the] hill.” In this moment, everything changes: “It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill // The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild.”

Once the jar enters the context of this “wilderness,” it is clear that the two are inextricably connected. This is because nature is immediately reoriented around this man-made landmark. Prior to its presence on this hill, nature was “wild,” it had no discernible pattern or movement. But immediately resulting from the jar’s “place[ment]” here, nature takes shape “around” it; nature “[rises] up to it” and surrounds the jar. The very roundness of this movement extends from the roundness of the jar itself: “round it was...round upon the ground.”²⁸ In this way, nature begins to mimic the physical form of the object. While this movement is still described as “sprawl[ing]” which indicates a sort of untamed, feral quality, the jar creates a perspective through which it *can* sprawl. The object gives the nature a center to sprawl *around*. “A hill” becomes “*that* hill”—an

²⁶ Stevens, Wallace. “Anecdote of the Jar.” *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*. Ed. John N. Serio. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. 49. [Here quoted in full]

²⁷ “Slovenly” and “sprawled” have an almost moralized quality (i.e. “slovenly” points to the notion of sloth), which anthropomorphizes the wilderness. This makes the jar’s effect on it that much more powerful.

²⁸ The repeated sound of *round* and *g’round* contributes to our impression of roundness here. It emphasizes how the very placement of the jar rounds the ground, or put differently, how the jar gathers it (the ground) round. The significance of roundness is something we will discuss in much greater length in Chapter Three.

orient-point that grounds and arranges the surrounding environment. In this sense, the jar physically reorganizes the wild nature around it. Consequently, nature is “no longer wild.”

The poem seems to suggest that the jar does even more than just organize or reorient the natural space that surrounds it: it goes so far as to civilize nature. The object is described as “tall and of a port in air,” which gives it a sort of authoritative essence of superiority. More specifically, the expression “of a port” is a particularly extraordinary choice because of all of the possible definitions and diverse interpretations that sprawl around the term itself. “Of a port” could refer to a sort of gentlemanly portliness in stature which suggests an air of superiority or stuffy arrogance, or at the very least a substantial presence; a grounding sort of location (like a sea port) where everything comes together and passes through; a portal as a similar sort of entrance and exit point; being portable, as in bearing the weight of something else; or even to the verb *purport*, meaning to appear or claim to be or do something falsely. Each of these meanings sheds a slightly different perspective on the function of the jar in this environment, but all seem unanimously to emphasize its central and managerial role in relation to the wilderness. And, as if there was any doubt about the subjugated nature of this relationship, the blatantly assertive first line of the last stanza clears this up. With “It took dominion everywhere,” the jar takes absolute control over the delicate natural scene that surrounds it.

While the jar is very clearly connected to (and in control of) the external terrain in which it is situated, it never becomes fully assimilated into the landscape. Rather, it continues to protrude conspicuously from its natural surroundings. The last three lines of

the final stanza serve to characterize this disparity: “The jar was gray and bare. / It did not give of bird or bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee.” The jar is plain and not aesthetically interesting: it has no color, no design, and no noteworthy shape. This physical barrenness, along with the aural barrenness of the word’s lone syllable, hints at the lowliness of this kind of object in comparison to the landscape of Tennessee.²⁹ The jar is very clearly established as a dead kind of object. It is not alive and moving like the nature around it; it “[does] not give of bird or bush” like everything else in Tennessee does. The jar is a non-natural thing that is unable to reproduce, nourish, or contribute to its surrounding animal and plant world in any way. Thus, while the jar civilizes and very clearly governs nature, it will never be a native part of it. The tone of the poem hints at a definite negativity in this relationship between jar and landscape; descriptions of the object itself in contrast to the bountiful (but now controlled) nature, feel bleak and barren. The syntactically awkward nature of such descriptions, particularly in the final two lines of the poem, give voice to the disjointed and complex nature of this relationship.

For the vast majority of the poem, the relationship between jar and landscape is one that exists and functions solely within the context of external environment, i.e. the wilderness of Tennessee. However, when taking a more careful look at the first line of the poem, “I placed a jar in Tennessee,” Stevens does more than merely establish the origin of the connection between the object and its localized setting. For the first and only time the poem, there is a hint at a subjective presence that otherwise disappears when talking about the jar’s barren appearance and its dominion over the land. This “I” calls the attention of the reader inward for a brief moment, to an obscured narrator. The jar is

²⁹ The primary value in such an object normally lies in its utilitarian purpose, although even this practical holding function gets lost, as there is no mention of the interior of the object in the entire poem. “Gray” even suggests a sort of opaqueness so that the interior of the jar becomes hidden and thus irrelevant.

not simply “placed...in Tennessee” in passive voice, but rather, there is an active agent (“I”) that put it there. This “I” assumes a tremendous amount of power: thanks to its action, Tennessee becomes a place rather than a wilderness.

While the presence of this “I” insists upon the existence of some figure with an inner, subjective life, Stevens provides no answers as to who or what this “I” may be, nor about their interior motivations. In this way, the placement of this pronoun in the first line of the poem is a parallel gesture to the placement of the jar in Tennessee; both the pronoun and the jar are characterized by their blankness, which allows them to serve as placeholders for things not visible in the poem. This opens up a number of metaphorical possibilities. Firstly, the empty pronoun can take the form of any number of different subjectivities because its referent is completely undefined. Given the complexity of perspective and pronoun usage that is characteristic of Stevens’ work, this “I” can be thought of as a fictionalized speaker or abstractly isolated mind. It is also plausible to imagine it as the poet himself—either Stevens or a more universalized poet figure—because the poet is a similar sort of creative agent who is often hidden from view in their poems. Thus, “Anecdote of the Jar” becomes a reflection on the interiority and exteriority of a speaking subject in poetry, even while it does not comment on this subject explicitly.³⁰

Additionally, the act of this subjective consciousness placing the jar in Tennessee is itself a metaphorical placeholder for something that extends beyond the boundaries of this poem. Consider the following claim by critic Kinereth Meyer: “Through the act of

³⁰ In thinking about whether or not it is fair to read this poem as being about poetry, we must remember that Stevens himself said, “Poetry is the subject of the poem” in section XXII of “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” (*Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*. Ed. John N. Serio. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. 101.) While this was not in direct reference to “Anecdote,” this can serve as evidence that Stevens would be open to this interpretive application in the case of this poem.

placing a jar in the wilderness, Stevens attempts to recover through form what he sees is beyond his signifying powers.”³¹ Here, Meyer means to say that the act of placing is a means of appropriation for the poet, whereby he is able to take command of something otherwise outside of his poetic control, namely an external wilderness.³² Through this act of poetic placing, Stevens is able to re-make and/or aestheticize the surrounding landscape. By doing so, he thus imagines a new kind of relationship between his poetic act and a larger external reality. This is a relationship that is characterized by poetry’s power to transform the world outside of it, which allows the poet to accomplish something otherwise impossible. As critic Bonnie Costello explains,

“Anecdote”...reveals a process by which landscape enables the poet to respond to his world affectively. Landscape [and specifically the act of placing the jar within this landscape] involves the exclusion of certain realities and the transfiguration of others, but it also has the effect of disclosing what is otherwise unobservable. (Costello 63)

Stevens uses the jar object-metaphor to “transfigure” reality in his poem, which is his way of responding “affectively” to an external world in which poetry does not typically have any power, influence, or universal value. He uses the jar object-metaphor to imagine a relationship between poetry (or even on a smaller scale, between an interior subjective life) and nature (an external objective world) in which the former has authority over the

³¹ “Ekphrasis and the Hermeneutics of Landscape.” *American Poetry* 8 (1990): 25.

³² In speaking about any kind larger external reality in the context of poetic analysis, we must be cautious. One might ask: even when the poet describes an external scene such as the Tennessee landscape, how can it really be considered “reality” when it is still just a linguistic representation that exists only within the world of the poem? As Bonnie Costello argues, “The transformation of geographical place to metaphorical site, from local particulars to landscape, does not imply an evasion of reality but a means of approaching it. Stevens’ landscapes express the pragmatic and provisional nature of imaginative acts, tied to our position in time and place.” (*Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. 60.) Because Stevens’ localized geographical site (the Tennessee hill) is treated as a “metaphorical site” (or landscape, in Costello’s terms), it opens up the possibility for the poet to address a world outside the limited one of the poem. It is the similarly metaphorical nature of the jar object and act of being placed within that landscape that unifies our external position in time and place and our internal “imaginative acts,” allowing us to approach reality within the realm of the poetic.

latter. This is a way of finding and asserting poetry's place in an externalized non-poetic setting.³³

Like Stevens, Philip Larkin is another poet who employs a vessel object-metaphor to scrutinize the relationship between an external environment and subjective interior experience. His 1958 poem, "Home is so Sad," offers a look at a vase from the space outside of it, much like in Stevens' "Anecdote." The two stanzas describes a slow zooming in on "That vase" inside of a home, which no longer contains the feeling of homeliness that once existed there: "The beliefs and relationships on which this home was founded have passed away, leaving only an inventory of possessions, a residuum of nostalgia."³⁴ While the poem serves primarily as a linguistic sketch of this home and the sad atmosphere that lingers within in it, the vase plays a critical metaphorical role in subtly bringing the speaker's internal, emotional experience into this devastated external scene. The fact that the vase can silently hold these two worlds together helps the speaker reconcile the reality of his changed, damaged home with the rush of inexpressible emotion that he experiences as he stands in it.³⁵

³³ An extremely interesting discussion of exterior landscape in relation to an exclusively poetic interior can be found in Mary Ann Caws' analysis of Stevens' "The Poems of our Climate" in "Now a Piece for Our Climate: Apology for an Interior Journey." *Centerpoint: A Journal Of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1.3 (1975): 25-27. In this article, she describes how poetry accompanies readers on a journey from "exterior city sites" full of chaos and confusion to "an inscape...an inner landscape conceivable only here." (26) In certain ways, one might argue that this is exactly what Stevens does in "Anecdote."

³⁴ Harrison, DeSales. *The End of the Mind: The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens, Larkin, Plath, and Gluck*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 117.

³⁵ The other catalogued possessions (i.e. the pictures, the cutlery, and the music in the piano stool) all hint at some element of interiority and/or containment. That is to say, pictures are often situated inside of albums that must be opened and flipped through, and contain memories, stories, and personalities in their images; cutlery is stored in drawers (I think here of Larkin's line in "Deceptions" that says, "Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives." [*Collected Poems: Philip Larkin*. Ed. and intro Anthony Thwaite. Victoria: Marvell Press; London: Faber and Faber, 2003. 67.] that hints at a special relation between an emotional or intellectual interior and this contained image); music is kept *inside* the piano stool. While these objects are

This poem depicts an extremely melancholy scene. The title and first line of the poem, “Home is so Sad,” sets the stage for the overwhelming sadness that the speaker is experiencing throughout the rest of the poem:

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft
Of anyone to please, it withers so,
Having no heart to put aside the theft

And turn again to what it started as,
A joyous shot at how things ought to be,
Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
The music in the piano stool. That vase.³⁶

Even while the home is “pathetically personified,”³⁷ it is emptied to the point of devastation. With words like “bereft,” “withers,” and “having no heart,” it is robbed of its warm, happy, homey qualities that existed prior to “the theft.” And yet, the traces of the memory and nostalgia that previously permeated this home still linger in the subtle, almost hidden details of the poem’s final three lines: “...You can see how it was: / Look at the pictures and the cutlery. / The music in the piano stool. That vase.”

The introduction of “You” halfway through the second stanza marks an important perspectival shift in the poem, where a trace of subjectivity flows in for the first time after seven and a half lines focusing only on describing the home. Unlike with the “I” in Stevens’ poem, however, this subjectivity is not a trace of the speaker himself. Rather,

all *contained*, the vase is a containing object itself. And so, for reasons we will explore in much more detail shortly, the object-metaphor of the vase can hold the speaker’s emotional interior in a way that these other objects cannot.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 88. [Quoted here in full]

³⁷ Booth, James. *Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight*. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 161.

the speaker points to “You”—presumably to us, his readers—to look at the scene ourselves. The speaker himself

...is there as witness to the human, lends us his eyes for the motion outward to the scene. The scene comes close to speaking for itself and the speaker brings the reader’s humanity into close contact with an embodied abstraction which is inseparable from the visualised setting itself.³⁸

As Terry Whalen explains here, the speaker is present merely as a sort of “witness” to point out the “human” element, or the emotionality present in this scene (this is what Whalen refers to as the “embodied abstraction”). Yet, *all* he does is point. By “lend[ing] us his eyes,” the speaker relinquishes any responsibility he may have had to describe, explain, or illustrate the scene in any detail because he claims, “You can see how it was.” And yet, we cannot actually “see how it was,” and for two main reasons: 1) this is a linguistic recreation of the home, and so does not allow us real visual access into anything and 2) the home no longer looks or feels the way it once was. All that can be seen is the “visualised setting itself,” and yet for the speaker, the feeling (or “embodied abstraction”) of what home once was is inbuilt in that perceived setting. Consequently, as we accept his observations as our own,³⁹ we also accept the self-evident meaningfulness that is imbued in the scene for him. Put perhaps more simply, we adopt his feelings of nostalgia, memory, and emotional loss.

³⁸ Whalen, Terry. *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986. 27.

³⁹ A wonderfully thorough explanation of this is found on page 97 of the same text by Terry Whalen: “Most of Larkin’s poetry is engaged in visual participation in the observable physical world. His speakers often beckon the reader...into a *beholding*-process. ‘Look’, says the speaker in ‘Home is so Sad’...This kind of invitation to witness is not simply an accident of form; it is the result of an epistemological conviction that the truth—as Larkin sees it—is inseparable from an attending alertness of mind...We join the perceptual journey insofar as we are willing to respond to the substance and suggestiveness of the world as he presents it. The reader does not venture far into Larkin’s world unless he participates in the speaker’s curious glance.” (Emphasis added, to point out the vocabulary of “containment” that this expressed relationship between reader and poetic speaker shares with our own object-metaphor)

Whalen refers to the emotional content of the scene as an “embodied *abstraction*” [emphasis added] because it is left blatantly undescribed.⁴⁰ We know that the speaker feels these things because it creeps in through the melancholy tone of the poem, but he never admits or relates it directly. We are supposed to be able to see it and feel it on his behalf. The only real clue as to where this feeling is hiding lies in the ostensive “that” in the last line of the poem, which functions like a finger pointing to the vase. The other objects in the home such as the pictures, the cutlery, or the music are all referred to with the definite article “the,” which—along with its bold placement as the final phrase of the entire poem—causes the “that” to stand out even more prominently.

The vase is able to contain the interior subjectivity of the speaker in a way that the other objects do not because of its special nature as holding vessel. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the void is what gives a vessel holding potential; this is where vases generally hold water and flowers, their most common contents. The holding potential of Larkin’s vase also comes from its interior void, although not in terms of its physicality. Much like Stevens’ use of the empty pronoun “I,” this vase’s void is shaped by a sort of blankness, which functions on two levels. Firstly, we do not know what (if anything) actually fills the vase’s interior because the speaker has failed to comment on this at all. This allows the reader to fill in that blank void however they choose. Secondly, the identifying phrase, “That vase,” embodies a sort of emptiness in its speechlessness. Syntactically speaking, it is the shortest phrase in the poem, consisting of only two

⁴⁰ Larkin himself explained that, “I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think that the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art.” (*Required Writing*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983. 79) Larkin admits here that his goal is for the experience to speak for itself. This is exactly what the speaker enforces in “Home is so Sad.”

words; the more complex sentences of the previous stanza suddenly simplify and the rhymes blur as they approach this image. Yet, this two-word line is neither detached nor unaffected—quite the contrary. The emptiness of the phrase “create[s] an effect of stumbling emotionality,” as James Booth describes it (161). This descriptive emptiness allows it to become an “embodied abstraction,” or a metaphorical placeholder for something much more personal and complex than a bouquet, namely, for the feeling and memory of home and family that has been lost for the speaker and the muddle of feelings that he struggles to express. While the title of the poem insists on an emotional response, the speaker is otherwise unable to articulate it directly. It is the vase object-metaphor, in its extreme blankness, that is able to hold the nostalgic momentum that builds within this poem.

The vase object does more than just metaphorically contain the speaker’s interior subjective experience in this poem, however. The speaker uses the object-metaphor to reconcile his deep, inexpressible internal experience with the external surroundings of home because the object-metaphor holds *both* together, albeit exceedingly discreetly. The focus of the entire poem is on the external environment of the home, and yet, when we scrutinize it more rigorously, we notice that it is almost bursting with the speaker’s deep affective and innermost response to that environment. Because the speaker himself acknowledges only the external element by pointing to the object-metaphor and leaving it blank, he avoids having to outwardly confront anything going on in his subjective interior. Instead, Larkin hands this responsibility to the reader. By recognizing the speaker’s unspoken emotional interior as it is connected to the externalized image of home, we as readers (the “You” in the poem) actually do the emotional work of

reconciling these external and internal worlds for him. This is a possibility that poets who begin in that interior space—I think here of the deeply internalized perspective of Merrill’s speaker in “A Renewal”—do not leave open for the reader. In this way, Larkin invites us to participate in a unique opportunity in “Home is so Sad”: to interact directly and personally with his experiences of exterior and interior space.⁴¹

⁴¹ A more expansive inquiry into conceptions of poetic exteriority could also include Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Monument” and Rainer Maria Rilke’s “The Panther.” While neither includes in itself a vessel image, both shed valuable light on the way in which seemingly externalized settings are actually deeply reliant on and connected to some sort of interior perspective. Additionally, Jacques Derrida aptly discusses the exteriority of language itself in Part I of his famous essay, “Of Grammatology.”

CHAPTER THREE: The Surface

Phenomenology of poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man considered as the being of a surface, of the surface that separates the region of the same from the region of the other.

~Gaston Bachelard (222)

Thus far we have talked in detail about the two spatial realms that characterize vessels, namely exterior and interior, or outside and inside. We have noted how interiority and exteriority are inextricably and necessarily tied to one another—how they shape and define each other. That is to say, any contained interior space is defined by the fact that there is a space *not* contained, an exterior. Our examination of Merrill, Stevens, and Larkin have all shown that such “outside and inside are both intimate—they are always ready to be reversed” (Bachelard 217-18). Bachelard goes on to say that, “If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides” (218). This “border-line” is precisely where we turn now.

In thinking about the vessel as an object-metaphor that represents quite literally an engagement with outside and inside spaces, there does in fact exist “a border-line surface between such an inside and outside” as Bachelard speculates. This is the physical surface of the jar or vase itself. Not only does this element of the object-metaphor serve to delineate and differentiate outside from inside (and thus serve as the boundary through which the two spaces participate in a sort of exchange or interrelatedness), but it is this border that opens up additional possibilities for modern and contemporary poets. Consider the epigraph by Bachelard above. By imagining this “being of a surface” as the “being of man,” we can more closely examine the relationship between “the same” and “the other.” For our purposes, this relationship between same/other can also be thought of

in terms of similarly structured dualities such as outside/inside, poetic/non-poetic, or subjective interior/objective exterior. This allows us to further explore such relationships.

Taking a closer look at a poet who focuses directly on the surface of a vessel will help clarify for us how our object-metaphor opens up a poetic space in which these kinds of reflections can occur. The most renowned instance of this is in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” [full text of poem can be found in Appendix] where John Keats pays careful attention to the artistically crafted surface of an urn. While Keats is a romantic poet that wrote over half a century before modernists like Stevens and even earlier than contemporary poets like Merrill or Larkin, his concentration on the urn’s surface frames the way in which these later poets deal with the complex spatiality of similar vessel object-metaphors. Through a meticulous study of the images engraved on it, Keats paints a picture of an object whose interaction with space is extremely distinctive. Because of the rounded curve of its surface,⁴² the urn (like all vessels) is always eclipsing itself. It thus embodies a very unusual tension between the seen and the unseen, the linear and the circular, the outside and the inside. This complex interaction with space invites the urn’s employment as a metaphor through which poets and readers may consider a poem as a similar kind of object, one which can be held up, turned around, and scrutinized like the urn.

While the central focus of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is the engraved scenes that are found on the urn’s surface, the reader is able to get a sense of what the urn looks like even prior to considering the artistic content of these engravings. This is because the ode

⁴² This rounded surface is the thing that shapes the internal void of a vessel, according to Heidegger. As he explains in “The Thing,” the walls of a jug give the object its structural shape and thus, its purpose as a containing object: “But the jug does consist of sides and bottom. By that of which the jug consists, it stands. What would a jug be that did not stand?...one that would indeed hold but that, constantly falling over, would empty itself of what it holds....” (*PLT* 167)

is constructed in the likeness of the urn itself, thematically as well as formally. The poem acts as a sort of recreation of the urn's physicality through language, creating an impression of its rounded aesthetic. With the title, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the urn immediately becomes the central focus point around which the entire poem circles, mimicking the rounded shape of the urn itself; each stanza moves around to view the urn from a different perspective as it concentrates on a new scene. The formal aesthetic of the ode further enhances our sense of its roundness, as each ten-line stanza begins with a Shakespearian quatrain (ABAB) and ends with a Miltonic sestet (CDECED). This creates an undulating repetition within the systematically staggered line indentations, which gives an impression of the urn's circular physicality even prior to considering the poetic message that the object-metaphor itself communicates.

Additionally, its characterization as an ode—"a lyric poem typically...in the form of an address to a particular subject"⁴³—fashions another kind of circularity within the poem. Keats directly addresses the urn in second person with various "thy['s]" and "ye['s]" and "thou['s]" throughout the five stanzas, and in the final stanza the secondary voice enters with the proclamation, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (ln 49). This creates a communicative loop between the speaker (and/or the poet) and the urn itself, impressing upon the reader a new kind of linguistic circling around the object. While this poem is an address to the urn in this way, it is important to note that it is not titled accordingly.

⁴³ OED online: entry "ode." Literary critic Mary Ann Caws offers a brief but poignant commentary on odes in her article, "Now a Piece for Our Climate: Apology for an Interior Journey." Here, she thoughtfully articulates the reason they have value for her. Namely, that they lead to an understanding of what literature is. While she specifies this as a quality of an ode specifically to a city, I believe that this holds true in our thinking about Keats' ode as well: "Any ode to a city might well be an overt act of gratitude for those very uncrystalline corridors and for those ragged outlines we are permitted and encouraged to retain here; for some of us they lead, paradoxically, to what not just poetry, but literature is, if they lead nowhere else." (from *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1.3 (1975): 27.)

Rather than “Ode *to* a Grecian Urn,” the title reads “Ode *on* a Grecian Urn.” This illuminates the poem’s function as a reflection or commentary *on* the object for the speaker and Keats’ readers, as well as a conversation or address with the object. This opens up space for us to reflect more comprehensively on the different ways in which the object (and the poem) engages with roundness.

While the configuration of the ode itself gives an impression of the urn’s roundedness, the object’s dimensionality really comes alive in looking at the engraved images depicted on its surface. The speaker deliberates in great detail on each scene, with each stanza serving as a visual account of the beautiful maiden singing to her lover, the springtime scene of love in the trees, the sacrificial altar, or the “marble men and maidens overwrought” (ln 42). And yet, these images are not merely flat, purely pictorial representations of Greek life. As eloquently articulated by critic Eva T. H. Brann, “Here is a poem addressing an urn and describing the pictures upon it, pictures which in turn induce visions of a world *behind* them.”⁴⁴ In this way, the urn creates a representational quality that is vastly different from that of a two-dimensional painting. Let us take a closer look at what Brann means when she talks about this world that exists “behind” the pictures on the urn.

By using the word ‘behind,’ Brann invokes the existence of a world that extends beyond the images on the urn. This behind space is something that Keats also alludes to in the ode itself. By asking questions such as “What men...are these? What maidens loth?” (ln 8) and “What little town by river or sea shore, / Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel, / Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?” (ln 35-7), the speaker implies

⁴⁴ “Pictures in Poetry: Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn.’” *San Jose Studies* 14.3 (1988): 11. [Emphasis added.] All further citations of Brann refer to this article.

that these men and maidens do, in fact, come from somewhere, and that they have real histories and homes that do not appear in the urn's engravings.⁴⁵ There is a narrative that extends behind the urn's surface, wherein the characters on it come from a particular story and external location that exists beyond what is visually depicted. In this sense, the scenes and the figures on the urn are connected to something outside of, or behind, the two-dimensional surface of the artwork.⁴⁶

This narrative behind-ness can also be conceived of in historical terms, which in some ways connects the urn more significantly to a non-imaginative reality external to it. By referring to the urn as a "Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme," (ln 3-4) the speaker indicates that there is a historical element that vibrates quietly behind the surface of the urn and its figures. This history is something that the urn can express in a way that "our rhyme," or poetry, otherwise cannot due to its nature as a purely aesthetic or artistic medium. As a linguistic construction of a

⁴⁵ While these characters seem to come from a real place outside the representational realm of the engravings, they remain trapped as artistic subjects on the urn. The speaker implies that they stumbled onto the art object accidentally when traveling from their real "little town." Yet, this town now sits abandoned somewhere, eternally emptied of its inhabitants because they are frozen on the urn's surface: "town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (ln 38-40). In this way, these figures are neither purely artistic creations nor are they wholly real people that are part of a real non-poetic world. Critic Klaus Hoffman tries to reconcile this by describing how the images that inhabit the urn's surface "[distinguish] the urn—the 'shape'—from the zone of pictorial representation, which, beyond its natural reality as part of the urn, is of a different quality: It is an apparition of reality, it 'haunts about thy shape.'" (Hofmann, Klaus. "Keats's Ode to a Grecian Urn." *Studies in Romanticism* 45.2 (2006): 260.) The images depicted on the urn's surface are, as Hoffman explains here, more than just a "natural reality as part of the urn." Rather, they are "of a different quality": they are a version, or "apparition" of some reality that extends beyond the realm of mere "pictorial representation." In this way, they do more than just allude to some exterior world behind the artistic images, but they also reflect it in some ethereal way. We can thus think the urn's pictures as a sort of hybrid of the representational world contained on the urn's surface and a real world that exists behind those representations.

⁴⁶ Brann describes this as "...the broaching of the boundaries between art and life...the poet wanders off the vase to view and to muse about the empty little city with its vacant acropolis, the city which the celebrants had left one morning long ago for the altar in the woods, only to be caught in a static enchantment forever. (11)

thingly object within a poem, the urn is both an imaginative artistic expression *and* a historical artifact. Consider critic Earl Ingersoll's take on this dual function:

The urn is at one and the same a "sylvan historian" and a work of art. As such it offers a symbolic expression of the victory of human aspiration in its struggle against time. That victory is achieved through the power of the artifact to make permanent what the imagination produces.⁴⁷

As a sort of "artifact," the urn accomplishes two things. First, as Ingersoll suggests, the images on its surface give a sort of permanence to the historical scenes that now only occupy a space in our imagination and memory. This is because all of the figures on the urn are static engravings that cannot move or change from how the artist initially fashioned them. The beauty of the lover in stanza two "cannot fade" (ln 19), and the two lovers will never kiss; the "happy boughs" of stanza three "cannot shed [its] leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu," (ln 22) just like the trees in the previous stanza that can also never be bare.⁴⁸ Phrases like "for ever" are strewn throughout the entire poem—five times in the third stanza alone—to emphasize the permanently frozen state of the figures portrayed here. The story engraved on the urn's surface is a preservation of an imaginative history.

Additionally, the urn is a historical artifact in that it locates itself very consciously in a particular historical and artistic context. It is very purposely identified as a *Grecian* urn. Consequently, specific aspects of style are infused into our impression of the object. The "mysterious priest" (ln 32) and the "peaceful citadel" (ln 36), for instance, embody certain distinct aesthetic and cultural characteristics even when described with little

⁴⁷ Ingersoll, Earl G. "Yeats's 'Quarrel' with Keats: History and Art in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli.'" *Yeats Eliot Review: A Journal of Criticism and Scholarship* 10.2 (1989): 57.

⁴⁸ It is because of this narrative frozenness that the urn is initially referred to as a "bride of quietness" and a "foster-child of silence and slow time" (ln 1-2). And yet, the images are far from static; there exists something very real and very alive behind these still, "marble men."

specificity. We envision perhaps the typical ceremonial robe that the ancient Greek priest is thought to have worn, or complete versions of the large stone citadels that remain in ruins in Greece today. Stylistically speaking, we may imagine a red or black figure vase, or even something reminiscent of the Elgin marbles of the Parthenon and other buildings on the Acropolis of Athens. While scholars have yet to come to any consensus regarding what kind of urn Keats was writing about specifically, the historical characterizations that he hints at bring a real sense of past human life and culture to the poem and our conception of the urn object-metaphor itself. In this way, these historical characterizations locate the urn in a larger narrative that is preserved outside of both the object's engraved images and the poem itself.

This sense of behind-ness that the urn's images evoke allows the pictorial representations on the urn's surface to be brought into close relation with some sort of a reality external to the art object, whether that be a narrative or historical reality as we have discussed. The images are able to do this because the surface on which they are engraved is inherently involved with a sort of perspectival behind, or a depth beyond itself. This is something that is not the case for similar pictorial representations in a painting or other two-dimensional art objects. The distinct roundness of the urn's surface (which is characteristic of all vessels, shaping their interior void so that they may hold things) creates a certain spatial depth. Keats acknowledges this curvature and the consequent dimensionality that it creates only extremely subtly in "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape [...]" (ln 5) The use of "about" here suggests a sort of quality of around-ness in the shape of the object, without ever pointing to it explicitly.

A more overt account of the object's around-ness can be found in Keats' "Ode on Indolence," where the urn appears in the poem's first stanza to point out its own shapeliness:

One morn before me were three figures seen,
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:
They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn,
When shifted round to see the other side;
They came again; as when the urn once more
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return [...]
(ln 1-8)

As Keats describes here, an urn is an object that is always eclipsing itself because of its rounded shape. As the figures stretch across the urn's surface, they disappear as it curves continuously around. And so, this roundness necessitates that one "[shift] round" the urn or walk around it to see the engraved images and scenes in their entirety. Consider critic G. Gabrielle Starr's account of this interaction with such an object:

An urn is a tricky thing. We cannot see its entirety at once, if we stand, ourselves alone, and without (let's say, a mirror's) aid. The images the urn carries fade away with the curve of its surface, the swell of its skin. To get a sense of its entire form...we must turn it, or walk around it, and as we see it as a whole, each moment reveals to us the loss of vision as well as the gaining of it.⁴⁹

It is this fact that some part of the urn is always hidden from view that opens up the possibility for a world to exist behind its surface. We, as viewers and readers, are able to imagine that the engraved "folk" once flocked from a real "little town" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn" ln 37-8) because there is no precise visual account of where they came from in our direct line of vision. It is almost as if they "pass'd" onto the urn from

⁴⁹ Starr, G. Gabrielle. "Poetic Subjects and Grecian Urns: Close Reading and the Tools of Cognitive Science." *Modern Philology: Critical and Historical Studies in Literature, Medieval Through Contemporary* 105.1 (2007): 54-55.

somewhere behind it, and if we “shifted [the urn] round to see the other side” (“Ode on Indolence” In 6), we would see this world.

The presence of this hidden ‘behind’ space is one of the extraordinary ways that this object-metaphor helps poetry become a vehicle for self-reflection and even philosophical investigation. For Bachelard, this ‘behind’ space is the place in which we can think about what it means to be human: “In a mediation on the subject of being, one usually puts space between parentheses, in other words, one leaves space ‘behind one.’” (231) This is because—as with the “pious folk” in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—the obscurity provides a space behind the visible and/or literal surface for us to project our own thinking and realities, which in turn allows us to examine them more closely.

This inherent act of eclipsing is one of the reasons that the urn (and all similarly round vessels such as jars and vases) also function so well as metaphors for poetry itself. The walking around that is required of the urn becomes an instructive itinerary for reading poems. Because the vessel insists on a lack of transparency “without (let’s say, a mirror’s) aid” (Starr 54), it requires that we hold it up, turn it around, and scrutinize it from all perspectives, unlike a painting or any other two-dimensional art object like a textual image. By imagining a poem as a kind of vessel, the poem assumes a similar dimensionality and so poetry consequently takes on a new relation to its surrounding non-poetic space. This forces the reader to engage differently with a poem than is otherwise the case. The act of poetry (both writing and reading it) becomes an act of much greater concentration, effort, and even a certain degree more of commitment, as understanding it

completely means walking around and around it to examine it from all its possible critical and interpretive orientations.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Another valuable study of roundness—although not in the specific context of vessel objects—as it relates particularly to phenomenology and poetry is in Bachelard’s essay, “The Phenomenology of Roundness” (also found in *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. 232-241.) Additionally, a larger version of this paper might also explore the numerous accounts of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as an ekphrastic poem, which functions as a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art. This could include James A. W. Heffernan’s book, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1993.); Theresa M. Kelley’s article “Keats and ‘Ekphrasis’: Poetry And The Description of Art.” (from *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*. 170-185. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2001.); Murray Krieger’s “Ekphrasis And The Still Movement Of Poetry, Or, Laokoon Revisited.” (from *The Poet as Critic*. 3-26. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1967.); or Cristina La Porta’s “Confronting the Artifact: Interrogative Ekphrasis in Keats and Leopardi.” (from *Rivista di Studi Italiani* 14.1 (1996): 36-47.) among many others. This version of the paper would also look at Elizabeth Bishop’s “Exchanging Hats,” which conceives of a new kind of surface that serves to illuminate the complexity of what we think of as surface more generally. She talks about the underside, or inner surface, of a “turned-down brim” of a “black fedora.” This is certainly an element of surface that can be located in any number of vessel object-metaphors as well.

‘Behind’ the Metaphor:
A Conclusion

Poems must circle the thing to be identified with metaphor,
approaching but never reaching the definition of the thing itself.
~Jane T. Johnston⁵¹

By tracing the various ways in which poets treat vessel images in their work, we have begun to understand how the attention to such objects and to their inherent topography of containment allows poems to consider the intimate exchange between outside and inside. This exchange, as Bachelard notes, is a fundamental part of being human. And so, examining this object-metaphor and its engagement with outside and inside spaces provides a framework through which we can reflect on the relationships between our subjective interior lives and surrounding objective world, as well as between our own poetic acts and the non-poetic.

As containing objects with inherently round surfaces, all vessels assume a certain kind of deep dimensionality that any two-dimensional art object such as a painting or a piece of text on a page cannot. This curvature necessitates that a vessel be an object that is always eclipsing itself in some way, as Keats demonstrates in his ode. This requires that as observers, museum-goers, readers, etc., we walk around the object in its entirety to get a complete impression of it and its relationship to the world surrounding it. By metaphorically re-imagining a poem as a similar sort of dimensional object, we can engage with poetry in a way that is different from our usual treatment of it as a flat, chiefly textual object on a page.

⁵¹ Johnston, Jane T. “A Metaphor For Paradise: Wallace Stevens’ Philosophical Use Of Metaphor.” *Essays In Literature* 1.3 (1973): 2.

It has been the aspiration of this project to do precisely this. By walking around our vessel object-metaphor as it is employed in various modern and contemporary poems, we have engaged with each of its spatial dimensions—from perspectives external to the object, within its containing internal space, and upon the surface boundary that lies between the previous two. This has allowed us to investigate how each poet is able to extend the reflective work that they do and disclose different things about the “being of man” by making use of such spaces. When Merrill recognizes the inherent act of internal containment that the vase is capable of and uses the object as a metaphor for his (and/or his speaker’s) own subjective interior life, for example, he is able to contain and control a complex emotional experience that is otherwise chaotic or overwhelming. He can regulate this fraught internal experience by virtue of the fact that it takes the externalized form of autumn leaves vibrating within a vase. By imagining the possibility for exteriority and interiority to be inverted in this way, the speaker is positing a dialectics of outside and inside that are intimately connected. The vase itself establishes this interrelated dialectics due to its inherently intertwined, complex, and simultaneous interaction between outside and inside, or exterior and interior spaces.

For poets such as Stevens and Larkin, consideration of their respective vessels is an important element, even an orient-point, for locating themselves in an external world that is otherwise governed by forces outside of their control. Both poets use their vessels as placeholders for some aspect of their inner lives or selves, which allows them to assert their presence and/or control over their surrounding environments. For Stevens this takes the form of an active displacement of creative poetic authority onto the jar. Whereas for Larkin, the vase performs a gesture of exclusion that reminds him of a past that he cannot

return to, while also containing the incommunicable meaning of that homely past for him. In both cases, the object-metaphor offers both poets and readers a chance to experience a world in which a creative, subjective, emotional life (and poetry, as a creative, subjective mode of artistic expression) has an important and influential place in contexts outside of ourselves.

In his close inspection and illustration of the surface boundary that exists between outside and inside spaces, Keats gives us another possible explanation as to how poetic and artistic representations (products of an imaginative interior life) may extend into a non-imaginative, even historically factual, exterior realm. Because this surface directly embodies this kind of dizzy exchange between outside and inside spaces, it makes manifest an experience that is part of being human. By scrutinizing this experience as an object (namely the urn, for Keats) from every possible angle and spatial orientation, the poem (and we, as readers) can reflect on it much more deeply and concretely.

This investigative project extends beyond the mere attempt to understand why such a curiously commonplace object appears in much of modern and contemporary poetry. I have endeavored to pay attention to this object—one that is remarkable in its utter un-remarkableness—as a way of inquiring into some elemental aspect of human experience. As critic Cristina La Porta affirms, “Literature establishes a ‘perspective capable of systematically exposing the presence of the human subject behind representations.’”⁵² Our consideration of vessel object-metaphors has provided us with a new tool through which to uncover these human subjects, and by doing so, has shown us something about ourselves as such subjects. As readers, poets, and human beings who are

⁵² “Confronting the Artifact: Interrogative Ekphrasis in Keats and Leopardi.” *Rivista di Studi Italiani* 14.1 (1996): 36.

constantly participating in dramatic and dynamic exchanges between our inner selves and our environments, we can learn something by studying containing vessels as the metaphorical manifestations of this reality.⁵³

⁵³ Abundant thanks are due to my advisor, DeSales Harrison, for his generous guidance and support in the development and execution of this project. This paper also owes a great deal to Max Cecil, for his many hours of clarifying discussion and thoughtful feedback throughout its various stages of development. Additional thanks to Oberlin College Writing Associate, Jacob Lamoureux, for being my acutely observant, fresh pair of eyes.

APPENDIX

Ode on a Grecian Urn

1

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe of the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What made pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve,
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this fold, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

5

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

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