

Andrew Sofer

Epilogue: The Prop as a Stage of Art

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

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

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

Wallace Stevens, *Anecdote of the Jar* (1918)¹

Art is the setting-into-work of truth.

Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*²

¹ Wallace Stevens, Anecdote of the Jar, in: Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2nd ed., New York / London 1988, pp. 288–289.

² Martin Heidegger, The Origin of the Work of Art, in: id., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York 2013, p. 74.

A stage prop, I have argued, is an object that goes on a journey: »*Irrespective of its signifying function(s)*, a prop is something an object becomes, rather than something an object is.«³ For an item of stage dressing or costume to achieve prop-ness, it must be visibly triggered by an actor before an audience. But to be manipulated is not necessarily to become animated. Stage objects take on a life of their own when they transcend their usual, »transparent« function and draw the spectator's attention in their own right.⁴ In performance props may even come to rival the actor as a locus of stage movement and meaning.⁵ The jester's skull mocks Hamlet by holding a mirror up to mortality, even as the prince feebly conscripts it in service of his own wit. Ophelia's barbed flowers and Desdemona's magic handkerchief seem to doom everyone who touches them.⁶ As the essays in this volume demonstrate, a staged object can quickly move from basic life equipment to performative property to symbol to relic or fetish – even in the course of a single performance.⁷

By way of epilogue, I wish to ask: what might it mean to imagine a prop not just *on* the stage of art but *as* a stage of (and for) art? Consider the notorious jar placed by American modernist poet Wallace Stevens not ready-to-hand in a pantry, where we might expect it, but in a more propitious state: the state of Tennessee. What is a jar? A man-made object whose function, Heidegger says of an imaginary jug, is its holding and whose essence is a void.⁸ In Stevens's poem, the jar – likely a Dominion Wide Mouth Jar, a commonplace artefact in 1918 when the poem was written – becomes a solo act. It clears a stage for its masterful, site-specific performance art upon its hill,

3 Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, Ann Arbor, MI 2003, p. 12. For more recent scholarship on stage props, see my review essay: Getting on with Things: The Currency of Objects in Theatre and Performance Studies, in: *Theatre Journal* 68 (2016), pp. 673–684.

4 Frances Teague emphasizes this dislocated function in *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties*, Lewisburg, PA 1991. For the quasi-Eucharistic debate within theater semiotics on whether material objects are derealized on stage so as to become signs, see, for example, Freddie Rokem, A chair is a Chair is a CHAIR: The Object as Sign in Theatrical Performance, in: Yishai Tobin (ed.), *The Prague School and Its Legacy in Linguistics, Literature, Semiotics, Folklore, and the Arts*, Amsterdam 1988, pp. 275–288.

5 See, for example, Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (eds.), *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, Cambridge 1996 and Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda (eds.), *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, Cambridge 2003.

6 Andrew Sofer, Felt Absences: The Stage Properties of *Othello's* Handkerchief, in: *Comparative Drama* 31 (1997), pp. 367–393; id., The Skull on the Renaissance Stage: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Props, in: *English Literary Renaissance* 28 (1998), pp. 47–74.

7 See also Igor Kopytoff, The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process, in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 64–94, and Bill Brown (ed.), *Thing Theory*, Chicago, IL 2004.

8 Martin Heidegger, The Thing (*Das Ding*), in: id. 2013 (note 2), pp. 161–184. For the jug as a trigger for Proustian memory, see Kate Bush, A Coral Room, *Aerial* 2005.

with the »slovenly« wilderness conscripted as its audience. The ringed jar is in turn encircled by its wild, in-the-round audience. Yet the pun in »made« (line 3) suggests performative magic: the surroundings are *made* slovenly, are *made* wilderness, by the jar's intrusion into the landscape, its insistence on being staged and seen. The jar is a stage as well as occupying one (the hill), and like any stage moveable, in transit from one signification to another.

As the poem continues, the jar tames its wild audience. The wilderness rises to the occasion; it sprawls, like a carefree spectator, around the jar, »no longer wild.« But what is a wilderness once it is no longer wild? Perhaps an un-bewildered audience, arrested by the expectation of something about to happen; to sprawl, after all, is to spread or stretch in a careless manner. This sprawling attention continues even as wilderness settles down to watch the performance. As the hypnotic iambic tetrameter lines foreground chiming internal rhyme (»The jar was round upon the ground«), Stevens places us in the realm not just of nursery ditty but of the Russian formalists' *ostranenie* (defamiliarization).⁹ For from what perspective is a jar »tall«? Certainly not ours. But then scale itself is a trick of phenomenology; without a perceiver, nothing can be tall, or small, or large. Perhaps we, the bewildered reader, are inside the artful jar (thrust onstage?) looking out through its transparent curvature at the scene.

Enter metaphor: the jar is »of a port in air.« A port is a place where things load and unload – an etymological cargo of meanings – while Latin *portus*, which literally means a port or harbor, figuratively suggests a place of refuge or asylum. This »port of air« is a haven as well as a potential portal to somewhere beyond the poem's relentless circularity. In Late Latin, a port is also a warehouse – a *fundus*.¹⁰ But the poem does not explain *for whom* the jar is of a port of air – poet, wilderness, or reader. Unmoored from familiar coordinates, we may dock at this air-port in any way we wish. Stevens, in other words, keeps this port(al) ajar.

Stevens's now grandiose jar colonizes whatever it sees: »It took dominion everywhere.« Dominion is the right of uncontrolled possession, use and disposal. We ourselves are now the prop's property (Latin *dominium* »property, ownership,« from *dominus* »lord, master,« from *domus* »house«).¹¹ No longer merely the cynosure of the wilderness's gaze, the jar arrogates all it surveys – but from whose perspective?

9 Viktor Shklovsky, *Art as Technique* [1917], in: Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reiss (eds.), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Lincoln, NE 1965, pp. 3–24.

10 For a theoretical account of the theatrical *Fundus* as opening up a »horizon of (re-)usage« see Sascha Förster's essay in the present volume.

11 The English word »dominion« is ghosted by the King James Version's rendition of Romans 6:9: »Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him« – famously echoed by Dylan Thomas's rapturous 1933 poem »And Death Shall Have No Dominion.«

Thanks to the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia (or perhaps *prosopopoeia*), does the jar itself lord it over us, its subjects? Surely not. Rather, it is the poet's imaginative act of *placing* the jar »onstage« that appropriates Tennessee. In Heideggerian terms, the jar »stays« – detains and gathers – the world, binding earth and sky, mortal and divine. Heidegger's poetic image for this four-in-one manifold is that of *ringing*. As the jug jugs, or the jar jars, an entire phenomenological world rings into being.¹² Each thing does its own thing, dancing in the round. And since anecdotes are etymologically secret or private stories, it seems apposite to import Robert Frost's two-line riddle poem »The Secret Sits« into our Tennessean scene:

»We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.«¹³

At the center of a scene of art – a ring, a jug, a jar, an urn – lies the mystery of the void.

Abruptly Stevens brings us back to the titular jar's properties: »The jar was gray and bare.« Stevens, I think, conscripts an early meaning of »bare« as sheer, absolute – complete in itself. But as a phenomenological object of the gaze the jar cannot be complete in itself; nor both gray and bare, since in order for color to register someone or something must be looking at it. The poem's last two lines complete Stevens's vertiginous anecdote with something akin to Frost:

»It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.«

Having achieved thingness, the jar has (in Heidegger's own phrase) come into its own, manifesting itself as a stage of art.¹⁴ The jar tethers Tennessee, a United State of mind. Is the jar-thing, then, still the hand-prop originally placed in the landscape by the poem's speaker? Certainly the displaced or re-placed jar has undergone the staged journey with which I began. It is portable, handled, observed by a spectator.¹⁵

12 »The mirror-play of the worlding world, as the ringing of the ring, wrests free the united four [earth and sky, divinities and mortals] into their own compliancy, the circling compliancy of their presence. Out of the ringing mirror-play the thinging of the thing takes place.« Heidegger 2013 (note 8), p. 178.

13 Cited in Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2011, p. 56.

14 Heidegger 2013 (note 8), p. 175.

15 »A prop can be more rigorously defined as a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance« (Sofer 2003 [note 3], p. 11). My definition has been much contested in subsequent prop studies; see, for instance, the essays in: Jane K. Curry (ed.), *The Prop's the Thing: Stage Properties Reconsidered*, Tuscaloosa, AL 2010; Eleanor Margolies, *Props*, London 2016; and Sophie Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props: Memory and Cognition*, New York / London 2019.

Moreover, its function has been displaced in Teague's sense. Instead of fulfilling its mundane function of containing jam or some other comestible, the jar is *a void that stays the world of the poem*.¹⁶ Like Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes in Heidegger's famous account, the personified, wide-mouthed jar discloses a truth rather than standing for something else.¹⁷

Conceiving Stevens's anecdotal jar as a stage of art conjures to mind one undoubted inspiration for »Anecdote of the Jar:« John Keats's »Ode on a Grecian Urn« (1819), arguably the most famous ekphrastic poem in the English language. The first thing to notice is the wily preposition in the poem's title. Keats's encomium is not *to* the urn but *on* it (compare his »To a Nightingale,« »Ode to Psyche,« »To Autumn«). This sly substitution suggests an ode not only *about* a Grecian Urn but inscribed

upon that urn. And indeed the urn, which boasts painted pagan scenes of sacrifice and revelry, *is* a stage of and for art. Eschewing its practical function as a depository for human remains, the splendid urn is now a museum piece to be admired for its aesthetic properties. For the duration of the poetic event, urn and poem are artistic rivals in an ekphrastic *agon* – a theatrical scene of struggle (fig. 1).

As a theatricalized series of scene-paintings, Keats's urn incites the poet's erotic and metaphysical fantasies as he muses on the ancient Greek figures frozen in mid-action. Circling the urn, presumably on foot, the poet discovers the erotic pursuit of a shepherdess by a shepherd to the accompaniment of a second shepherd's pan-pipes. He also describes a stately procession to a temple by the inhabitants of a deserted town, lowng sacrificial heifer in tow. The poet idealizes the figures on the urn caught *in medias res*, especially the Arcadian lovers »[f]or ever panting, and forever young; /



1. Keats's drawing of the Sosibios vase (c. 1819)

¹⁶ »Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is.« Heidegger 2013 (note 2), p. 71.

¹⁷ »The art work lets us know what shoes are in truth.« Ibid., p. 35.

All breathing human passion far above.«¹⁸ The denizens on the urn have transcended the mortal world of human passion, which the poem characterizes as ceaseless thirst. On the urn's immortal stage, by contrast, passionate sexuality is all anticipation, no disappointment:

»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 will thou love, and she be fair!«

And yet the poet's admiring but paradoxical epithet for the urn – »Cold Pastoral!« – recognizes that the art work cannot have it both ways. To achieve immortal perfection in art is to deny or asymptotically defer human warmth, feeling and erotic satisfaction, just as to plunge into the messy world of human passion is to forsake the dream of perfect transcendence. Keats, who never married his fiancée Fanny Brawne and died tragically young, never resolved this paradox in his own life.

Yet the poem insists on the urn's transcendent truth, leaving Keats's own psychosexual biography as penitence. Viewed from yet another angle, we can see the urn using the poet to animate its scenes, turning absorption into theatricality, tacitly conjuring both poet and reader into being for the duration of the poetic *event*. That is, this particular »stage« of art is temporal as well as spatial (Keats is, we might say, going through a stage). For the duration of the poem's recitation or silent reading, we enter Keats's imaginary museum, not unlike Tennessee, *from* somewhere else and on our way *to* somewhere else. By contrast, the speaker-poet remains contained inside his timeless poem, wedded to (im)mortality in the shape of the circular urn itself. »Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity,« he concedes; the sibylline urn is the Secret that sits in the middle and knows. A »friend to man,« the urn counsels: »Beauty is truth, truth beauty« – a good persuasion, as Shakespeare's Lysander might say. Yet in a dramatic irony, the speaking urn's codicil suggests that some Frostian Secret is held back still: »that is all / Ye know on earth, *and all ye need to know*« (my italics). The poet imagines these words of consolation spoken in some future age, when Keats and his generation are long dead. But for the now of the poem, he is content to be the urn's medium and mouthpiece – unlike Stevens, who seems to have vacated the stage of art at the end of his poem (»Anecdote of the Jar« begins with an »I« that is never seen again), leaving his metaphysical jar »barely« there.

18 John Keats, Ode on a Grecian Urn, in: Susan J. Wolfson (ed.), *John Keats: A Longman Cultural Edition*, New York 2007, pp. 358–360.

Given the importance of being urns, or jars, or jugs, or hammers, or any of the other magnificent props considered in this collection, it seems fitting to close with Samuel Beckett's conflation of speaking subject and theatrical object. Beckett's grotesquely comic *Play* (1963) takes place in a Purgatorial space in which a man, his wife and his mistress have surrealistically fused with the gray urns that contain their posthumous remains. The three stage figures line up in a row facing the audience, urns touching, but because their heads are fixed none can hear nor even seems aware of the presence of the others. The trio are compelled by a harsh spotlight to recount the story of their sordid love triangle in torrents of words. Acting as inquisitor and master of ceremonies, the spotlight flicks from urn to urn, compelling involuntary speech from the protruding heads. Beckett blurs the boundary between objects and people: these characters are not figures in urns, but urn-figures. Stranded onstage with their necks held fast in their urn's mouth, these hackneyed characters must perform to the point of exhaustion – the final stage direction reads »Repeat play« – until the curtain. Beckett's omission of the definite article reminds us that theater is also playing, and we may take the title as an invitation to play along ourselves if we wish. Banal in content yet fascinating in execution, *Play* sculpts an unforgettable stage of art out of the stalest boulevard material. To circle back to our beginning: on and as a stage of art, the enigmatic prop seizes our collective imagination. And it is we who must complete its journey (at least for now) by choosing to end play.

Credits

1 Wikimedia Commons

Andrew Sofer, Epilogue: The Prop as a Stage of Art, in: Requisiten. Die Inszenierung von Objekten auf der ›Bühne der Kunst‹, hg. von Joanna Olchawa und Julia Saviello, Merzhausen: ad picturam 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1186.c16894>