

JAMES STEPHENS' PROSE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

While in Dublin, Eire (1950-1952) I came in contact with admirers of James Stephens, read his work, and was impressed both with the excellence of his writing and the fact that he was virtually unknown in the American academic circle.

Upon commencement of formal graduate studies at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, I was encouraged to do a critical study of the man's work with the idea of discovering whether or not my admiration for him was critically sound.

Nothing that I have been able to discover has been written with Stephens as its chief concern. There are a few casual comments in prefaces to anthologies and in books on Irish literature, but rather than sustained, serious studies one finds the usual notice and unimpassioned praise that is found in obituary columns. The most positive statements on the man seemed to be concerned with his relations to famous writers such as Synge, Yeats, Joyce, and Lady Gregory rather than with his art. Outside the pale of Dublin, Stephens is virtually unknown, and except for The Crock of Gold, Irish Fairy Tales, and Collected Poems, his works are out of

print, and some of the best prose he has written is hidden away in such difficult to procure works as The Demi-Gods, Mary, Mary, Deirdre, Etched in Moonlight, and In the Land of Youth.

Before presenting aspects of Stephens' prose which I feel sure will arouse interest and respect, I think it appropriate to observe the author as a man. Stephens was born in Dublin in 1882, had a very sketchy formal education including no university study, and worked as a civil servant in the capacity of clerk. He served as registrar of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1916 to 1925. Then he began a series of lecture tours in America.<sup>1</sup> Outside the core of Irish writers including Yeats, Russell (A. E.), Synge, Lady Gregory, George Moore, Martyn, and Hyde, who associated with one another in the first half of the twentieth century, Stephens was in what might be considered an outer ring of Padraic Colum, John Eglinton, Lord Dunsany, Mackenna, and Gogarty. Stephens spent most of his life (he lives at the time of this writing in either Dublin or Paris) in Dublin, London, and Paris, and while abroad became fast friends with James Joyce. In Dublin Stephens was brought into the coterie by A. E., whose satisfaction in his protege seemed to have annoyed Yeats to such a degree that he was tardy in

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<sup>1</sup>Collier's Encyclopaedia, XVIII (New York, 1951), p. 212.

extension of his welcome.<sup>2</sup> Although a detailed reporting of Stephens' personal life is obviously out of keeping in a study of this nature, it might be well to establish in our minds the environment in which he wrote.

Though Stephens grew up and wrote in an atmosphere of disorder and misery under English rule which culminated in the Insurrection of 1916 and the "Anglo-Irish War" from 1919 to 1921, his work is noticeably clear of fighting, faction, bloodshed, or bitter cries of vengeance. And though the same abject poverty which seared "The Modest Proposal" from Swift and a large part of the bitterness in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man from Joyce was omnipresent, Stephens--never blind to the exigency of the situation--is unimpassioned, unembittered, and optimistic. In fact, the very essence of Stephens is his indomitable bouyancy; elfish, he flits from the slough and the slum through the broad range of heaven, neither in despair at the one or in awe of the other. He crosses the line from the real to the unreal and from the sublime to the ridiculous with an amazing insouciance which comes not from a lack of perception or proportion but directly from his concept of the essential unity of all creatures.

Stephens is beyond his immediate environment. Though it is interesting and to a certain extent satisfying to know

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<sup>2</sup>Estella Taylor, Modern Irish Writers (Lawrence, Kansas, 1954), p. 173.

the circumstances behind and surrounding what one observes, it must be asserted that Stephens possesses that quality of universality found in all authors worthy of note. The problems arising from exploitation, fanaticism, and ignorance he treats broadly. He attacks no individuals, no countries, no factions but only the basic concepts that, he feels, evil is founded upon; consequently, his work may be appreciated and enjoyed without particular historical study.

Certain aspects of his work such as his philosophy, humor, pathos, and style have been analyzed to bring support to my thesis that there is quality in Stephens' prose which does not justify the contemporary neglect of him.

## CHAPTER II

### STEPHENS' "PHILOSOPHY"

While observing Stephens' philosophy, we are confronted with a certain element of paradox wherein we logically come to the conclusion that we may not base our attitudes on logic; but we need not, in the face of this, be dismayed, for life manifests many paradoxes which seem to be intrinsic parts of the inscrutable whole within which we wander. Life can lead, as we are ever aware, only to Death. Light can exist only in the shadow of Darkness; the Unknown has being only in the reflection of the Known; Satiation can come only out of Desire; Rest cannot exist without its brother Fatigue; Movement may not be cognized as an absolute; there must either be a point not in motion or other movements of various speeds and/or directions, or detection is precluded, nay, impossible.

The scientist is concerned with objectively observing and recording the actions and interactions of phenomena. He labels these actions and interactions, attempts to set up a causal relationship so as to "understand" the beginning and predict an end (both concepts peculiar to man) in a particular aspect of nature. The philosopher attempts to utilize all this particular knowledge of the specializing scientists



by compacting it into a whole wherein all knowledge is synthesized and broad generalizations may be made concerning humanity, its contact with nature, and its inclination toward the supernatural. Philosophy is primarily concerned with effecting, through its "understanding," attitudes in individuals resulting in actions which will enable mankind to be "happier."

But Stephens is not impressed by formal philosophy. He says:

The name of male thought as it faces the world is Philosophy, but the name it bears in Tir-na-Og [the higher place--Eternity] is delusion. Female thought is called Socialism on earth, but in Eternity it is known as Illusion; and this is so because there has been no matrimony of the minds, but only as hermaphroditic propagation of automatic ideas, which in their due rotation assume dominance and reign severely. To the world this system of thought, because it is consecutive, is known as Logic, but eternity had it written down in the Book of Errors as Mechanism: for life may not be consecutive, but explosive and variable, else it is a shackled and timorous slave.<sup>1</sup>

This is the foundation upon which Stephens bases his "philosophy," which, as we shall see more clearly after amplification, is a denial of philosophy.

Modern realism, the love, almost reverence of objectivity, grew directly out of successful scientific experiment which resulted in material advancement. Writers like Zola and Flaubert emphasized man as an animal, which undeniably

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<sup>1</sup>James Stephens, The Crock of Gold (New York, 1930), p. 120.

in too many cases he was. Their mirrors of humanity, as they were polished, became clearer, and though they were focused on the lower aspects of humanity, readers began to delight in the picture they reflected. Undeniably there was truth in these pictures--the mirrors were not lying; and as these mirrors held by men like London, Dreiser, and Joyce came on every side showing clear and true pictures of the baser aspects of man, the reader became conditioned to this type of realism.

Stephens had grown up in this age of realism and had observed that the mirrors held up by these previously mentioned authors and their colleagues had, if anything, an adverse effect upon the reader. Unquestionably these authors had honestly emphasized the grossness and frailty of man in order to shock the reader into elevating action, but peculiarly readers came to "like" their reflections, came, in fact, to like them to the extent that thousands of lurid imitations poured from the publishing houses with the sole object of realizing sales through pandering to this aroused taste for the garish, the bloody, and the lascivious; the reader came finally to the point where he would look at nothing but these mirrors. Stephens came then with his glass, which he held up at such an angle that, though reflecting what humanity was and not blindly omitting the underside either, it also gave a view of something beyond, revealed a path that man might take in rising above his own

weaknesses. But the readers had been conditioned too long to the mirrors, and they with the deprecating words of "mysticism and fantasy" knocked his glass into the obscurity of the nursery.

Not long after Stephens' "glass" had been kicked to the horizon, man discovered that matter was not what he had supposed it to be. Amazingly he has found it interchangeable with energy; he has found it, inscrutably, to be composed of atoms of protons and neutrons forming a nucleus and negative charges revolving at about the speed of light in ellipses around these nuclei; and to add to the inconceivable smallness of these "things," the number of which that fitting on a pinhead would about equal the number of pinheads which could be crammed into Hyde Park in London, was the eldritch phenomena wherein these negative charges revolving in ellipses "jumped" from smaller to larger orbits and back, either giving off or absorbing energy in the process, without passing through the intervening medium and without any apparent cause or order. The implications of this "discovery" are staggering in their import. Man had come out of the darkness of idolatry and superstition to the beginnings of a higher concept--a number of gods, and on to the more beautiful concept of monotheism, and Christian humility. Western man had developed through the liberating influence of the Renaissance; he had disciplined himself in the Age of Reason; and, finally, under the influences of the

Industrial Revolution, he had evolved a philistine materialism which on one hand promised with upturned palm comforts and conveniences but which on the other, with a white-knuckled lifted up fist, threatened the destruction of the moral codes on which our civilization was supposed to be based.

Since man has found matter and energy interchangeable, matter, indeed, as inscrutable as force, order but a possibility, causality not apparently--as witness the atom--a necessity, when Stephens says to put down Logic in the "Book of Errors" as Mechanism, for "life may not be consecutive, but explosive and variable, else it is a shackled and timorous slave," his attitude, which has hitherto been viewed as fantasy and mysticism, appears in keeping with the latest discoveries of our scientists. Indeed, it is a pleasure to think that Mr. Einstein himself might have experienced particular delight upon reading Stephens. Of course to come logically to the conclusion that logic should be abandoned involves that inceptively mentioned paradox, but, as we have seen, life is composed of contradictions.

We are confronted with a dilemma involving a universe of order composed of a substance manifesting chaos. It is of course obvious that there may be an order in this apparent chaos, but so far we have not yet found it; and until we do, Stephens' glass might better be looked upon with less condescension. It might be well for man to up-end

himself, to turn away from his own reflection in those one-showing mirrors and look in another direction, if for nothing else for humility in the face of the realization that all our knowledge is based upon an order which may not in reality, or ultimately, exist. These scientific discoveries seem of the nature to dispose us again to humility, again to concern with emotion, again to flights of fancy, and at the same time away from a preoccupation with reason and the--what now appears to be--inflated idea of man's knowledge and perfectibility. And even as Montaigne said 500 years ago, though we look at things with our five senses, they may not be enough. Six, eight, ten, or even more senses might not suffice, and the plausibility of this proposition becomes apparent if we but think of man as having four senses instead of five. Could the fifth sense, then, whichever it be--sight, smell, touch, hearing, or taste--possibly be conceived? Could a man without a nose be convinced of the inviolability of a skunk?

Stephens' ideas, though they have been, at least ephemerally, cast aside, fit our unique position wherein we know more than we ever did before, yet realize that we, in point of fact, know even less than we thought we did. Our greatest philosophers, even idealists such as Santayana, attest to this. The following ideas of Stephens' are in direct opposition to our philistine materialism, our preoccupation with things, our fatuous folly of mistaking means

for ends, all of which have grown directly out of our inordinate love of reason. Caitilin NiMac Murrachu, after having lived with the god Angus, came to much realization.

But she discovered that happiness is not laughter or satisfaction, and that no person can be happy for themselves alone. So she had come to understand the terrible sadness of the gods, and why Angus wept in secret; for often in the night she had heard him weeping, and she knew that his tears were for those others who were unhappy, and that he could not be comforted while there was a woeful person or an evil deed hiding in the world. Her own happiness also had become infected with this alien misery, until she knew that nothing was alien to her, and that in truth all persons and all things were her brothers and sisters, and that they were living and dying in distress; and at the last she knew that there was not any man but mankind, nor any human but only humanity. Never again could the gratification of a desire give her pleasure, for her sense of oneness was destroyed-- she was not an individual only; she was also part of a mighty organism ordained, through whatever stress, to achieve its oneness, and this great being was three fold, comprising in its mighty units God and Man and Nature--the immortal trinity. The duty of life is the sacrifice of self; it is to renounce the little ego that the mighty ego may be freed; and knowing this, she found at last that she knew Happiness, that divine discontent which cannot rest nor be at ease until its bourne is attained and the knowledge of a man is added to the gaiety of a child. Angus had told her that beyond this there lay the great ecstasy which is Love and God and the beginning and the end of all things; for everything must come from the Liberty into the Bondage, that it may return again the Liberty comprehending all things and fitted for that fiery enjoyment. This cannot be until there are no more fools living, for until the last fool has grown wise wisdom will totter and freedom will still be invisible. Growth is not by years but by multitudes, and until there is a common eye no person can see God, for the eye of all nature will scarcely be great enough to look upon that majesty. We shall greet Happiness by multitudes, but we can

only greet Him by starry systems and a universal love.<sup>2</sup>

This also, we see, is in keeping with our latest discoveries; life seems a mystery. Stephens accepts this and asks us why we do not take it as it is and make of it something beautiful? But no:

Man is a scientific creature; he labels his ignorance and shelves it; mystery affrights him, it bores him, but when he has given a name to any appearance then mystery flies away, and reality alone remains for his cogitation. We have arranged to label these faculties of imagination [speaking here about religion] and prophecy among the lesser creatures Instinct, and with the label we have thrown overboard more of mystery than we could afford to live with. Later these may confront us again in our proper souls, and the wonder and terror so long overdue will compel our tardy obeisance.<sup>3</sup>

Concerning knowledge Stephens offers the following:

I have learned that the head does not hear anything until the heart has listened, and that what the heart knows today the head will understand tomorrow.<sup>4</sup>

He further attacks the inefficacy of reason with this humorous discourse between the learned philosopher and one of his mundane interrogators:

"We live as long as we are let," said he, "and we get the health we deserve. Your salutation embodies a reflection on death which is not philosophic. We must acquiesce to all logical progressions. Life runs to death as to its goal, and we

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 220-221.

<sup>3</sup>James Stephens, The Demi-Gods (New York, 1914), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 128.

should go toward that next stage of experience either carelessly as to what it must be, or with a good, honest curiosity as to what it may be."

"There's not much fun in being dead, sir," said Meehawl.

"How do you know?" said the Philosopher.

"I know well enough," replied Meehawl.<sup>5</sup>

And he sends this lightning bolt to strike sparks of insight on the flintiest set of senses:

She had found the Tree of Knowledge [the coming to Pan and the awakening of her body and resultant pangs of desire] but on every side a great wall soared blackly enclosing her in from the Tree of Life [peaceful happiness], a wall which her thought was unable to surmount even while instinct urged that it must topple before her advance: but instinct may not advance when thought had been schooled in the science of unbelief; and this wall will not be conquered until Thought and Instinct are wed, and the first son of that bridal will be called the Scaler of the Wall.

So, after the quiet weariness of ignorance, the unquiet weariness of thought had fallen upon her. That travail of mind which, through countless generations, had throed to the birth of an ecstasy, the prophecy which humanity has sworn must be fulfilled, seeing through whatever mists and doubtings the visions of a gaiety wherein the innocence of the morning will not any longer be strange to our maturity.<sup>6</sup>

The "innocence of morning" is used repeatedly by Stephens as a symbol of the millennium to which humanity aspires, and "not any longer be strange to our maturity" manifests a constant in Stephens' philosophy wherein he sees in children

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 108.



the unaffected, unreserved state of mind that we innately and happily possess but unhappily lose as we mature in a diseased society.

Stephens does not merely attest the uselessness of knowledge and reason by themselves; he comes out boldly and tells us what he thinks is wrong and why we are not happy. He here implies that the world would be a fine place if it were not for the depravity of its human beings.

The men and women were all hidden away sleeping in their cells, where the moon could not see them, nor the clean wind, nor the stars. They were sundered for a little while from their eternal arithmetic. The grasping hands were lying as quietly as the paws of a sleeping dog. Those eyes held no further speculation than the eyes of an ox who lies down. The tongues that had lied all day, and had been treacherous and obscene and respectful by easy turns, said nothing more; and he thought it was very good that they were all hidden, and that for a little time the world might swing darkly with the moon in its own wide circle and its silence.<sup>7</sup>

He insists that heaven is here before our very eyes and that we need not brood and concentrate on an after-life. Written in a predominantly Roman Catholic country, this subject would naturally be of interest.

There is a difference between this world and the world of Faery, but it is not immediately perceptible. Everything that is here is there, but the things that are there are better than those that are here. All things that are bright are there brighter. There is more gold in the sun and more silver in the moon of that land. There is more scent in the flowers, more savour in the

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<sup>7</sup>James Stephens, Here Are Ladies (New York, 1916), p. 44.

fruit. There is more comeliness in the men and more tenderness in the women. Everthing in Faery is better by this one wonderful degree, and it is by this Betterness you will know that you are there if you should ever happen to get there.<sup>8</sup>

He then begins to preach his religion, first by specifically pointing out what he considers wrong.

It is to be remarked that the angels were strangely like Patsy MacCann [the vagabond who took food wherever he could wrangle it]. Their ideas of right and wrong almost entirely coincided with his. They had no property and so they had no prejudices, for the person who has nothing may look upon the world as his inheritance, while the person who has something has seldom anything but that.

Civilization, having built itself at hazard upon the Rights of Property, has sought on many occasions to unbuild itself again in sheer desperation of any advance, but from the great Ethic of Possession there never has been any escape, and there never will be until the solidarity of man has been really created, and until each man ceases to see the wolf in his neighbor.

Is there actually a wolf in our neighbour? We see that which we are, and our eyes project on every side an image of ourselves; if we look with fear that which we behold is frightful; if we look with love then the colors of heaven are repeated to us from the ditch and the dungeon. We invent eternally upon one another; we scatter our sins broadcast and call them our neighbours; let us scatter our virtues abroad and build us a city to live in.<sup>9</sup>

He further tells us through a conversation between Nera and his mistress in a fantasy called In the Land of Youth what he believes our attitude should be:

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<sup>8</sup>James Stephens, Irish Fairy Tales (New York, 1953), p. 295.

<sup>9</sup>Stephens, The Demi-Gods, pp. 61-62.

"No," she replied, "they will not tell any one else. These men covet the treasure and will tell no one about it. They wish for treasure, and in a way they have it, but they have wished themselves into slavery to get it. You must not desire a thing which belongs to another person, for then there are two wishes, each acting against the other, and the people who are thus covetous are left in an unsatisfactory middle place which is torment."

"I see that it is of no use to wish at all," cried Nera discontentedly.

"Yes," she replied, "you may desire things which everybody can enjoy with you and that is true wishing."

"Such things as----?" said Nera scornfully.

"Sunlight and the song of birds, good food and health, a contented mind and a good understanding. These hurt no one, and every one is the better for possessing them, or for living among people who have them."<sup>10</sup>

The essence of Stephens' thought, both as a philosopher and as an artist, is presented in the following picture of beauty, with the obvious objective of moving us to action which will result in a happier mankind. Though the following quotation is a long one and, many will say, is both impractical and impossible, and though we may agree with these objections, so also do many speak of Plato's Republic as impractical, yet we see its intellectual beauty and continue to read him and to be enlightened and elevated by his work. In Stephens' final dance of the gods in The Crock of

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<sup>10</sup>James Stephens, In the Land of Youth (New York, 1924), p. 43.

Gold we see a quite different beauty, but beauty it is nevertheless.

They the fairies and gods moved freely each in his personal whim, and they moved also with the unity of one being; for when they shouted to the Mother of the gods they shouted to her with one voice, and they bowed to her as one man bows. Through the many minds there went also one mind, correcting, commanding, so that in a moment the interchangeable and fluid became locked, and organic with simultaneous understanding, a collective action--which was freedom.

The song exhorted the people to come to us, ye who do not know where ye are--ye who live among strangers in the house of dismay and self-righteousness. Poor, awkward ones! How bewildered and bedevilled ye go! Amazed ye look and do not comprehend, for your eyes are set upon a star and your feet move in the blessed Kingdoms of the Shee. Innocents! in what prisons are ye flung? To what lowliness are ye bowed? How are ye ground between the laws and the customs? The dark people of the Fomor have ye in thrall; and upon your minds they have fastened a band of lead, your hearts are hung with iron, and above your loins a cincture of brass impressed, woeful! Believe it, that the sun does shine, the flowers grow, and the birds sing pleasantly in the trees. The free winds are everywhere, the water tumbles on the hills, the eagle calls aloud through the solitude, and his mate comes speedily. The bees are gathering honey in the sunlight, the midges dance together, and the great bull bellows across the river. The crow says a word to his brethren, and the wren snuggles her young in the hedge....Come to us ye lovers of life and happiness. Hold out thy hand--a brother shall seize it from afar. Leave the plow and the cart for a little time: put aside the needle and the awl--Is leather thy brother, O Man?....Come away! come away! from the loom and the desk, from the shop where the carcasses are hung, from the place where the raiment is sold and the place where it is sewn in darkness: O bad treachery! Is it for joy you sit in the broker's den, o thou pale man? Has the attorney enchanted thee? Come away! for the dance has begun lightly, the wind is sounding over the hill, the sun laughs down into the valley, and the

sea leaps upon the shingle, panting for joy, dancing, dancing, dancing for joy....

They swept through the goat tracks and the little boreens and the curving roads. Down to the city they went dancing and singing; among the streets and shops telling their sunny tale; not heeding the malignant eyes and cold brows as the sons of Balor looked sideways. And they took the Philosopher from his prison, even the Intellect of Man they took from the hands of the doctors and lawyers, from the sly priests, from the professors whose mouths are gorged with sawdust, and the merchants who sell blades of grass--the awful people of the Fomor...and they returned again, dancing and singing, to the country of the gods...<sup>11</sup>

Is he wrong? Is he impractical? He does not say "abandon" your work; he says, "Leave your plow and your cart for a little time: put aside the needle and the awl. Is leather thy brother, O Man?....Come away!" Is there indeed something beyond wisdom? Is it not possible that the end of life may not be wisdom? As Stephens says, "...goodness and kindness are perhaps beyond wisdom. Is it not possible that the ultimate end is gaiety, music and a dance of joy?"<sup>12</sup>

Are our lives worth living? or as Joyce puns it in Finnegan's Wake, "It's what makes life worth leaving." In In the Land of Youth Stephens jostles reality and fantasy; a queen is visited by a stranger who attempts to coerce her to him by singing a song of death:

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<sup>11</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, pp. 226-228.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

Her eyes were closed that she might not see Midir. Her fingers were thrust in her ears that she might not hear him, and yet, through her clogged senses peace would invade her.

It was not lassitude, it was abnegation that assailed her. She wished, she did not will, to cease from all of labour, from all of difficulty. To lose all that she was, and all that she had known.

Her mind beat about its prison as a wild bird flies and beats within a cage.

What was she that was worth being? Had she aught that was worth the keeping? What did she know that was worthy of knowledge? Was there in the world but foolishness in being and in knowing? To rise in the morning and to sleep in the night! And between these to engage in futilities of thought and deed and emotion! Here we hear echoed the farewell cry of the philosopher in *The Crock of Gold*. And who in a difficult time has not been bent beneath these thoughts?

Almost she had lapsed to Midir, all but she was gone with him, when her heart sang, clearly, sweetly, innocently.

"--My branch! My Love! My Bird! My Lamb! Though all but seem, though all be sham, he is my Bird, my Love, my Lamb!

"My Land of Wonder and Delight! My Sun by day, my Moon by night! My Darkness and my Lovely Light!

"My Dream and my Awakening! My Treasure and my Song I sing! My Love, my Life, my Everything!

She took her fingers from her ears! She opened her eyes and opposed the god with a radiant brow. But already he had ceased from that chaunting, and, with his face bowed to his hand, he sat in silence.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Stephens, *In the Land of Youth*, pp. 226-227.

Is there anything which makes life more worth clinging to than love? And if the love for an individual be so powerful, so compelling, so inspiring, so beautiful a force, think on the wonder of a universal love! Have we not, with our look-at-me-deathwagons and our gadgets, been deluded so far and mocked? To what have we given birth but war and destruction, exploitation and hypocrisy--our Sunday morning morbid and mephitic goodness--and pomposity, avarice, hatred, and fear?

One may not coldly and rationally express such a philosophy. Obviously it abnegates reason and embraces a belief in man's innate goodness, a hope that there is hidden in him the ability to live in accord with, even delight in, Nature and his fellow man. True, the philosophy of Stephens is a romantic one, and we have come with our love of reason and science to look askance at the word and what it stands for. But let us pause for a moment and look about while we remember the "Age of Reason," what it produced and to what it was blind. Let us look again at our latest scientific probings which have left us faced with contradictions. And let us with humility turn away from that preoccupation with reason and reality which has hitherto resulted in lucidity, in wit, and in satire, but also in sterility of feeling, complete absence of inspired expression, of true poetry. We may not deny the intuitive aspect of our nature, for as Stephens says, when one is faced with a wall which thought

cannot surmount, one feels instinct urge that it must topple, "but instinct may not advance when thought has been schooled in the science of unbelief; and this wall will not be conquered until thought and instinct are wed."<sup>14</sup> This is what Stephens attempts to do. He is neither a romantic blind to the evil and depravity around him, nor is he a realist embittered into a naturalism which sees man only as a beast helpless in a sphere which is savage, cruel, stupid, and meaningless. Stephens can see, too, in the other direction; he is aware of the one aspect of existence, but he is not blind to the fact that life is also generous, kind, joyous, passionate, noble, and beautiful.

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<sup>14</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 108.



### CHAPTER III

#### STEPHENS' HUMOR

Before examining specifically just what in Stephens is humorous, we might do well to get in mind a clear idea of what we mean by humor, or broadly what it is which provokes laughter. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica,

...the phenomena connected with laughter and that which provokes it, the comic, have been carefully investigated by psychologists, in contrast with other phenomena connected with the emotions. It is generally agreed that the predominating characteristics are incongruity or contrasts in the object, and shock or emotional seizure on the part of the subject.<sup>1</sup>

We see, then, that a perception of the incongruous gives rise to laughter. Obviously there are varying degrees of perceptibility concerning the incongruous. To some, as to children, it merely means being able to see the "funny" side of a thing, wherein anything unusual which is not also frightening or saddening is "funny." To the philosopher whose experiences are broad and varied and who is capable of viewing the whole human comedy with a disinterested perspective, the humorous includes himself; he detects, as Meredith says in his essay on the comic spirit, "the ridiculous in

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<sup>1</sup>"Comedy," Encyclopaedia Britannica, VI (New York, 1929), p. 99.

others without loving them less; and especially by being able to see oneself somewhat ridiculous in loved one's eyes and accepting the correction their image of you proposes."<sup>2</sup> Meredith goes on to say that if one detects the ridiculous and is chilled by it, then he is slipping into the grasp of satire; if one, instead of beating the ridiculous person with a rod to make him writhe, prefers to sting him under a semi-caress, by which he shall wonder whether he has, in point of fact, been stung or kissed, then one is an engine of irony; however, Meredith adds:

If you laugh all around him, tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack, and drop a tear on him, own his likeness to you and yours to your neighbor, spare him as little as you shun, pity him as much as you expose, it is then a spirit of humour that is moving you.

The comic which is the perceptive, the governing spirit, awakening and giving aim to these powers of laughter, but it is not to be confounded with them; it differs from satire by not driving sharply into the quivering sensibilities, and from humour in not comforting them and tucking them up (like a mother) or indicating a broader than the range of this bustling world to them.<sup>3</sup>

Stephens handles a conversation between the two philosophers at the beginning of The Crock of Gold in the true comic spirit. Akin to Faust but unencountered by the devil's way out of the dilemma, one of the philosophers is contemplating suicide.

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<sup>2</sup>George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (New York, 1897), p. 76.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 77-78.

I have attained to all the wisdom which I am fitted to bear. In the space of one week no new truth has come to me. All I have read lately I have read before; all that I have thought has been the recapitulation of old and wearisome ideas. There is no longer an horizon before my eyes. Space has narrowed to the petty dimensions of my thumb. Time is the tick of a clock. Good and evil are two peas in one pod. My wife's face is the same for ever. I want to play with the children and yet I do not want to. Your conversation with me, brother, is like the droning of a bee in a dark cell. The pine trees take root and grow and die.--It is all bosh. Goodbye.<sup>4</sup>

Before going on with this conversation and commenting on its humor, I feel it incumbent that the extraordinarily propitious delivery of this passage be moved into focus. There is here a monotonous rhythm, indeed like the tick of a clock, which expresses futility, emptiness, and boredom. The philosopher's observations, especially to the intellectually bored, become the trenchant truths: "space has narrowed to the petty dimensions of my thumb; time is the tick of a clock; my wife's face is the same for ever; I want to play with the children and yet I do not want to; all I have read lately I have read before." That "I do not want to" is a sure sign of the author's perfect control over his medium. Change the line to--I want to play with the children and yet I don't, and we see at once that the lassitude we know so well is not expressed as it is in the very tedium and dragged out fatiguing slowness of "I want to play with

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<sup>4</sup>James Stephens, The Crock of Gold (New York, 1930), p. 6.

the children and yet I do not want to." Although one is tempted to emphasize style here, it is obvious that the style is inextricably interwoven with the reader's reaction to the humor.

Getting back to the subject at hand, the second philosopher, after a humorous but too long to quote introduction, rejoins:

You do not yet know how to play the tambourine, nor how to be nice to your wife, nor how to get up first in the morning and cook the breakfast. Have you learned how to smoke strong tobacco as I do? or can you dance in the moonlight with a woman of the Shee? To understand the theory which underlies all things is not sufficient. Theory is but the preparation for practice. It has occurred to me, brother, that wisdom may not be the end of everything. Goodness and kindness are perhaps beyond wisdom. Is it not possible that the ultimate end is gaiety and music and a dance of joy? Wisdom is the oldest of things. Wisdom is all head and no heart. Behold, brother, you are being crushed under the weight of your head. You are dying of old age while you are yet a child.<sup>5</sup>

The suicide intent philosopher, without hesitation, retorts:

Brother, your voice is like the droning of a bee in a dark cell. If in my latter days I am reduced to playing on the tambourine and running after a hag in the moonlight, and cooking your breakfast in the grey morning, they it is indeed time that I should die.<sup>6</sup>

Whereupon the sad man clears a space within the room, stands upon his toes and spins himself clear out of every vestige of breath, leaving his crumpled hulk bereft of any soul,

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

quite alone, and dead. Although Stephens is surely laughing at the intellectual who is "being crushed under the weight of his head," he is also laughing at himself for suggesting a life of "playing on the tambourine and running after a hag in the moonlight." He is here manifesting the true comic spirit wherein he sees, philosophically, all of mankind as a whole within an inscrutable framework and wherein the only possible recourse is "gaiety, music and a dance of joy." He knows he may paint this as an attractive picture of life; he knows too that it may be perceived by the sober intellect as puerility; at the same time he feels that nature has set things so or, better, that this is the way nature is and that to confront its force with either opposition or suicidal denial is but folly. Still he is humble in cognition of the inconsummate nature of his solution and is, as we saw, capable of laughing also at himself. A man with this philosophic attitude is incapable of the kind of bitterness which is found in Swift. Whereas Swift thrust the sword of his "Modest Proposal" into the "quivering sensibilities" of the guilty, Stephens, living also in a poverty-stricken Ireland, treats the problem of food supply, with the old tippler in a tavern who approaches the problems of feeding man and comes to the amazing conclusion that eating is a foolish and obscene, obsolete and disgustingly vulgar way of taking nourishment. He shows that trees, grass, bushes, and flowers manage to get their nourishment

from the soil and need not move nor be concerned when the dinner bell rings. By using realism in conjunction with ultra-ludicrous situations, Stephens comes up with the following:

If, once a week, men would bury themselves to the chin in good fertile clay, and allow the nurture of the earth to permeate their bodies there would be an end to this gross and unfortunate digestive activity. I have myself experimented in this direction with the most encouraging results. A rich loamy soil is very good--it is rather cold at the bottom but invigorating. Light sandy clay would suit sedentary persons, such as parsons, artists, and judges. In poor ground some super-phosphates, or a light compost could be strewn by each person around himself. Families would take turns in pruning each other and so forth; Dogs, though a most amiable people, would have to be abolished, but all these incidental matters would rapidly adjust themselves. After a time we might succeed in propogating ourselves by seeds or slips, and this would lead to a radical readjustment of our sex relations and put an end to many of the problems with which we are eternally badgered and perplexed.<sup>7</sup>

By offering these outlandishly ridiculous solutions to the problem of sustaining a society, Stephens has humorously accomplished his goal of pointing out that we are not trees, grass, or bushes--nor can we sit in the earth and be sustained thereby; but, in order to survive, some intelligent planning will have to be applied, or, as he says, "Of all the evils under which civilization staggers helplessly the most ponderous and merciless is hunger, and it is the evil

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<sup>7</sup>James Stephens, Here Are Ladies (New York, 1916), p. 344.

which will ultimately decimate all existing forms of life."<sup>8</sup>

Stephens, however, sometimes slips into satirizing the intellectually inflated as did Swift in his "Voyage to Laputa" but is less acrid than Swift as he gives us the philosopher confronted by a woman who candidly proposes marriage while he contemplates escape. She asks:

"Isn't it wisdom to go through the world without fear and not to be hungry in a hungry hour?"

"I suppose it is, but I never thought of it that way myself."

"And what would you call wisdom?"

"I couldn't rightly say now," he replied, "but I think it was not to mind about the world, and not to care whether you were hungry or not, and not to live in the world at all but only in your head, for the world is a tyrannous place. You have to raise yourself above things instead of letting things raise themselves above you. We must not be slave to each other, and we must not be slaves to necessity either. That is the problem of existence. There is no dignity in life at all if hunger can shout 'stop' at every turn of the road and the day's journey is measured by the distance between one sleep and the next sleep. Life is all slavery, and Nature is driving us with the whips of appetite and weariness; but when a slave rebels he ceases to be a slave, and when we are too hungry to live we can die and have our laugh. I believe that Nature is just as alive as we are, and she is as much frightened of us as we are of her, and mind you this, mankind had declared war against Nature, and we will win."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>James Stephens, In the Land of Youth (New York, 1924), p. 43.

<sup>9</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 100.

All the preceding is in keeping with the forementioned cure for hunger proposed by the bibulating bard and the discourse culminating in the death of the bored philosopher. Stephens is ever making humorous the intellectual's fatuous and futile proclivity to combat Nature, his pompous opposition to the manifestations of the inscrutable. To perceive the humor in these passages, of course, necessitates the perception of the incongruity of mortal man intellectually inflated to the ultra-ludicrous turgidity wherein he sees himself omniscient and omnipotent, in point of fact, a god. This idea enraged Swift, but Stephens only chuckles. Of course, Swift's anger and bitterness are a result of his cognition of the intellectual's lack of humility in the face of God; Stephens, however, laughs and makes us laugh, too, at the incongruity of the foolish and learned man contending with that with which he should and could be in accord. He who would deny hunger and fatigue instead of accepting them and delighting in their concomitants of food and rest is indeed a fool. Stephens very gently satirizes such men in the beginning of The Crock of Gold in this manner:

To them there were only two kinds of sound anywhere--They were conversation and noise: they liked the first very much indeed, but they spoke of the second with stern disapproval, and, even when it was made by a bird, a breeze, or a shower of rain, they grew angry and demanded it be abolished.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 6.



Stephens gleefully applies the feather of perception to the bare feet of our risibilities while concurrently conveying his philosophy on these square-wheeled thumps of laughter.

Children will dance upon the slightest provocation, so also do lambs and goats; but policemen and pukauns and advertisement agents, and fish do not dance at all, and this is because they have hard hearts. Worms and Members of Parliament between whom, in addition to their high general culture, there is a singular and subtle correspondence, do not dance, because the inelastic quality of their environment forbids any thing in the nature of freedom. Frogs, dogs and very young mountains do dance.<sup>11</sup>

The following passage employs a like juxtaposing of the incongruous, and also shows our vanities and follies to be owned by the lowliest of creatures; and we are forced to re-establish our values, to see the ludicrousness of our seriousness and gravity; we seem relaxed to laughter, to better action, to a greater charity.

A great many creatures capture or captivate their mates by singing. These are usually, but not always, birds, and include wily wagtails, larks, canary birds, and the crested earwig. Poets, music hall comedians, and cats may also be included in this category. Dogs are imperative and dashing wooers, but they seldom sing. Peacocks expand their tails before the astonished gaze of their brides, showing how the female sex is overborne by minor, unimportant advantages. Frogs, I believe, make love in the dark, which is a wise thing for them to do--they are very witty folk, but confirmed sentimentalists. Grocers' assistants attract their mates by exposing very tall collars and brown boots. Drapers' assistants follow suit, with the comely addition of green socks and an umbrella--

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<sup>11</sup>Stephens, Here Are Ladies, p. 285.

they are never known to fail. Some creatures do not marry at all. At a certain period they break in two halves, and each half, fully equipped for existence, waggles away from the other. They are the only perfectly happy folk of whom I am aware. For myself I was born single and I will remain so. I will never be a slave to the disgusting habit of matrimony.<sup>12</sup>

Irony, as we have seen isolated by Meredith, is not an inherent part of the comic spirit. The poet is not, if he becomes an engine of irony, concerned only with the "awakening and giving aim to these powers of laughter"<sup>13</sup> but he is "stinging him under a semi-caress."<sup>14</sup>

It was a delicious day. The sun was shining with all its might. One could see that it liked shining, and hoped everybody enjoyed its art. If there were birds about anywhere, it is certain they were singing. In this suburb, however, there were only sparrows, but they hopped and flew, and flew and hopped, and cocked their heads sideways and chirped something cheerful, but possibly rude, as one passed. They were busy to the full extent of their beings playing innocent games with happy little flies, and there was not a worry among a thousand of them.

There was a cat lying on a hot window ledge. She was looking drowsily at the sparrows, and anyone could see that she loved them and wished them well.

There was a dog stretched across a doorway. He was very quiet but he was not in the least bored. He was taking a sun bath, and he was watching the cat. So steadily did he observe her that one discerned at a glance he was her friend, and would protect her at any cost.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>13</sup>Meredith, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

There was a small boy who held in his hand a tin can and a piece of string. With his right hand he was making affectionate gestures to the dog. He loved playing with animals, and he always rewarded their trust in him.<sup>15</sup>

This light irony is not only laughable in itself but is a ridiculing of both those who are so blind as to see no evil in the world and those who though seeing the evil do not recognize it as an intrinsic part of existence, for, indeed, who can keep birds from eating flies, cats from ceasing their prowling after birds, dogs from wagging their tails at cats, and boys from wearing skirts and playing with dolls? It was, as we know, only before Satan seduced Eve that these wondrous conditions prevailed; for the time and since that sinful day these are natural phenomena, and in the true comic spirit one is to look and laugh, not to attempt to change the order of things nor to be so gushingly foolish as not to see the evil and the incongruous. However, as Meredith puts it, when one prefers to sting the object under a semi-caress, by which he shall wonder whether he has been stung or kissed, then one is an engine of irony, as the following passage indicates:

To the lonely pine house in the wood people sometimes come for advice on subjects too recondite for even these extremes of elucidation, the parish priest and the tavern.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Stephens, Here Are Ladies, pp. 176-177.

<sup>16</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 9.

This rather heavy irony, a weight Stephens rarely labors under, is reflected also in this:

The foundations of our society are steeped in beer--let no sacrilegious hand seek to interfere with it, for, even if the foundations were rotten, the interests of the Trade must not be disturbed, the grave and learned members of our corporations might be horribly reduced to working for their living, and our unfortunate City might have the extraordinary misfortune to scramble out of debt in the absence of its statesmen.<sup>17</sup>

But these relatively solid weights are rarely carried by Stephens. Though he does at times shoulder one of these encumbrances, he shortly realizes its unwieldiness, its incongruity with his own comic spirit, casts it aside, and, unburdened by any didacticism, flits about in the world he has created with the light airiness of a butterfly over a sun-drenched meadow. He pauses at moments, the wings of his style opening and closing with deliberate delicacy as he extracts with magic subtlety the essence of flavor from some buttercup of incongruity in the microcosmic field.

In one of his greatest books, The Demi-Gods, he gives us Patsy McCann, the rugged, emotional, free, simple, unaffected wanderer, who will not work, talking to his beautiful daughter, Mary, who has been engrossed, much to his verbally denoted dismay, in kissing their donkey. He makes a final and futile attempt to divert her attention:

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<sup>17</sup>Stephens, Here Are Ladies, p. 305.

"What I wish is this, that Christian people were able to eat grass like the beasts, and then there wouldn't be any trouble in the world. Are you listening to me, Mary, or are you listening to the donkey?"

"It's you I'm listening to."

"I say this, that if every person had enough to eat there'd be no more trouble in the world."<sup>18</sup>

In expressing the idea that economic security is a panacea for humanity's afflictions, Patsy McCann and the socialists, whose ideas Stephens refers to elsewhere as Illusion, are being satirized as those who see no farther than the donkey with whom Patsy unwittingly and humorously juxtaposes himself in the mind of the reader. We see that Mary might just as well "listen" to the donkey, which in point of fact, she does, as she kisses him again much to Patsy's compressed lips, puffed cheeks, and crouched brows.

It is indeed difficult to discourse upon Stephens' humor without including commentary on his philosophy as the two are so often and intricately interwoven as to preclude any positive attempts at isolation; and, rather than omitting aspects of either for the sake of a preconceived notion of unity, I shall adduce the following as an example of one of his passages which convey both humor and philosophy. The truth of the matter is that the impish little Irishman who takes nothing very seriously, especially

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<sup>18</sup>James Stephens, The Demi-Gods (New York, 1914), p. 3.

himself, rarely takes Philosophy for a jaunt without inviting fat, jolly Humor into the front seat, and sometimes he even sits Humor in Philosophy's lap, almost obscuring the poor frustrated soul whom he refers to as male thought on earth and Delusion in Tir-a na-Og. In the following little reconnoitre into the City of Education they are seated side by side and may be observed with relative ease although they are forever pulling and hauling at each other to gain vantage like two blatant brats. The tour is, admittedly a long one, but with these two little monsters engaged in a sticky-fingered hair pulling contest, it promises anything but dullness. As Stephens says, "If we ever revalue the values, let us write it down that the person who makes us yawn is a criminal knave."<sup>19</sup>

If one walks into any school in this kingdom one is certain to meet a tall, thin, anaemic youth with a draggled moustache and a worried eye who is endeavouring to coerce a mass of indigestible, inelastic and unimportant facts into the heads of divers sleepy and disgusted children. If a small boy, on being asked where Labrador is, replies that it is in the northerly point of the Berlin Archeipelago, he may be wrong in quite a variety of ways, but even if he answered correctly he would still know just as little about the matter, while if he were to give the only proper reply to so ridiculous a conundrum, he would tell his tormentor that he did not care a rap where it was, that he had not put it there, and that he would tell his mother if the man did not leave him alone. What has he got to do with Labrador, Terra del Fuego or the Isles of Greece? Give him a fistful of facts about Donnybrook, and send him away to hunt out the

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<sup>19</sup>Stephens, Here Are Ladies, p. 81.

truth of it, with a sandwich in his pocket and the promise of a lump of toffee when he came back with his cargo of truths--that would interest him, the toffee would make the information stick, while the verification of his facts would make his head fat and fertile.

When we ceased to be natural creatures, and put on the oppressive shrouds, wraps, and disguises which we label in the villainous aggregate civilisation, we ceased to know either how to teach or how to learn. We exchanged the freedom and spaciousness of life for a cramped existence compounded of spectacles and bad grammar, this complicated still farther by multiplication tables, the dead languages and indigestion tabloids...Civilisation, which is responsible for all the woes of life, such as washing, shaving and buying boots, is responsible for this also. Potatoes are more productive than Latin roots, are twice as nourishing and cannot be parsed. Teach a girl how to recognize an egg by the naked eye, and then teach her how to cook it. Teach a boy how to discover the kind of trees eggs grow on and what is the best kind of soil to plant them in. Teach a girl how to keep her hands from scratching, her tongue from telling lies, and her teeth from falling out prematurely, and she will, maybe, turn out a healthy kind of mammal having a house filled with brightness and laughter. Teach a boy how to prevent another boy from mashing the head off him, teach him how to be good to his mother when she is old, teach him how to give two-pence to a beggar without imagining that he is investing his savings in Paradise at 50% and a bonus; and then having eliminated civilization, education, clothes, tin whistles and soap this earth will not be such a bad old ball-alley for a man to smoke a pipe in.

Everthing is wrong. People should rise to their feet and salute when a farmer or a teacher comes into a room. No man should be allowed into Parliament who has not engaged in one or other of these professions, but because they are the two most important professions in the world their exponents are robbed and harried into slaves and fools.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 296.

There also is in Stephens an anthropomorphizing of animals and insects as employed by Aesop and Chaucer, except that here there is no attempt at character delineation; rather the speeches and antics of these "beings" are delicately interspersed throughout his work like tentative bird-songs fluted into the awakening morn, hanging in the purple pause of dawn for invisible, excruciating seconds, bringing us, as do those first shy morning trills, both to reality and beyond it. While we laugh, we feel affinity with and a sympathy for these creatures.

There came a crow whose happiness was so intense that he was not able to move; he stood on the hedge for a long time, and all that time he was trying hard to compose himself to a gravity befitting the father of many families, but every few seconds he lost all control and bawled with fervour. He examined himself all over; he peeped under his feathers to see was his complexion good; he parted the plumage of his tail modishly; he polished his feet with his bill, and then he polished his bill on his left thigh, and then he polished left thigh with the back of his neck. "I'm a hell of a crow," said he, "and everybody admits it." He flew with admirable carelessness over the ass, and cleverly stole two claws and one beakful of hair; but in mid-air he laughed incautiously so that he dropped the bits in his claws, and he got so excited in trying to rescue these before they reached the ground that his voice covered all the other sounds of creation.<sup>21</sup>

Like most of his work, this passage discovering the incongruity of an insignificant creature inflated with its own importance shown losing what little he had through dint

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<sup>21</sup>Stephens, The Demi-Gods, p. 35.



of his self-complacency, portrays concurrently the keys to humor and poetic justice. We laugh at the crow and yet we love him, for he has been frustrated by his own complacency, and we see that we, too, may be laughable and had better not take ourselves so terribly seriously. The crow blown up with his importance, making a fool of himself, teaches us a lesson without hurting our feelings. We laugh at the crow, and we alter our perspective. We relax; we feel warm; the sun is shining; the trees seem to sway in delight. All life is indeed beyond us, and our terrible crow-seriousness is ludicrous; we had better dance and laugh a bit.

This talking of animals gives us a sense of oneness with the world and its creatures. The children in The Crock of Gold decide to be cows.

So they became cows and ate a few blades of grass, but they found that when they were cows they did not want to say anything but "moo" and they decided that cows did not want to say anything more than that either, and they became interested in the reflection that, perhaps, nothing else was worth saying.<sup>22</sup>

A fly then lights on the cow's nose and they tell each other their troubles:

"I have seen them spiders," said the cow, "but they never did me any harm. Move up a little bit please, I want to lick my nose: it's queer how itchy my nose gets."--the fly moved up a bit. "If," the cow continued, "you had stayed there, and my tongue had hit you, I don't suppose you should ever have recovered."

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<sup>22</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 187.

"Your tongue couldn't have hit me," said the fly. "I move very quickly you know." Hereupon the cow sllily whacked her tongue across her nose. She did not see the fly move but it was hovering safely a half inch over her nose.

"You see," said the fly.

"I do," replied the cow, and she bellowed so sudden and so furious a snort of laughter that the fly was blown far away by that gust and never came back again.

This amused the cow exceedingly and she chuckled and sniggered to herself for a long time.<sup>23</sup>

The element of nonsense, although not necessitating the perception of a sage, is one which must be intellectually perceived for what it is before it will arouse our laughter. The two women, most obstreperous and obnoxious creatures who married the two philosophers in The Crock of Gold, had one child each and, finding they hated their own and loved the other's, traded and were for a time content. However, after one of the philosophers and his wife had spun themselves into limbo, the thin woman of Inis Magrath had to undertake the care of both children.

When one day the children did not return from play, being without her knowledge, in the hands of the Leprecauns, she became anxious. There was one of the children whom she hated; it was her own child, but since she had forgotten which one of them was hers, and as she loved one of them, she was compelled to love both for fear of making a mistake and chastising the child for whom her heart secretly yearned. Therefore, she was equally concerned about both of them.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>24</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 29.

Although, as we have seen, humor demands a perception of the incongruous, it is interesting to note that the bulk of Stephens' humor is aimed at the particular incongruities manifest by the intellectually proud; he no doubt feels that the follies of man when manifest by an intellectual are most ludicrous. It is, I would like to again point out, the "scholar and intellectual" whom he is attempting to reach. The philosopher returns home, whereupon his wife without a moment's hesitation confronts him: "'Husband,' said she, 'the Leprecauns of Gort na Cloca Mora have kidnapped our children.' 'Kidnapping,' said he."<sup>25</sup> And off he plunged into an interminable discourse on the subject. The poor woman is completely at a loss to reach her expatiating spouse; she she leaps into bed muttering something about lumps in his "stirabout."

Later in The Crock of Gold the policemen come to the philosopher and take him to jail, and Stephens loses no time in capitalizing on the situation wherein three rather simple policemen are dragging the learned philosopher, who has not the faintest idea, nor does he seem to particularly care, why he is being abducted through the dark night on a strange road, whereon they stumble into an old horse, an old lady's home, and are attacked by leprecauns. All the while the philosopher is bombastically expatiating--with some lights

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

of truth illuminating the general darkness of his discourse--on the uselessness of policemen to the utter dismay of the sergeant, who exclaims, "Will you shut your old jaw?" "I will not," says the philosopher, who continued. After some time the sergeant interrupts with, "Shawn, say something for goodness' sake to take the sound of that man's clack out of my ear." Shawn commences on dogs and cats. The philosopher comments drily and drolly on Shawn's poor efforts. Shawn weakens and hesitates, whereupon the philosopher takes up his discourse and is in turn interrupted by the sergeant with, "Cut in now, Shawn."

Later they are attacked by the leprecauns. "Let out," cried Shawn suddenly. "Let out or I'll smash your nut for you. There's someone pulling at the prisoner and I've dropped my baton." The truncheons of the policemen had been so furiously exercised that their antagonists departed as swiftly and mysteriously as they came. It was just two minutes of frantic, aimless conflict and then the silent night was round them again, without any sound but the slow creaking of branches, the swish of leaves as they swung and poised, and the quiet croon of the wind along the road.<sup>26</sup> This situation involving the incongruity of totally dissociated types in an environment strange to both reveals the humor of their attempts at communication, the risibility

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

of which is intensified by the eldritch attack by the leprecauns, culminating in dark baton-swining slapstick, in howls of surprise, muffled utterings, ejaculatory rebukes, and curses.

Another example of Stephens' humorous handling of the philosopher lies in the learned man's pedantic, prolix monologues which he delivers at someone who is usually waiting impatiently, desirous of communicating some grave information to which the philosopher seems determined to remain oblivious in favor of the dulcet sound of his own voice rippling over some insignificant subject. After an overly lengthy discourse of this nature in which he refuses to recognize interruptions by his wife, which are of much graver exigency than what he is blatantly blabbering, he finally notices her.

If you were going to say anything my love, please say it now, but you should always remember to think before you speak. Women should be seen seldom but never heard. Quietness is the beginning of virtue. To be silent is to be beautiful. Stars do not make a noise. Children should always be in bed.<sup>27</sup>

Here he is getting carried away--"These are serious truths which cannot be controverted; therefore silence is fitting as regards them."<sup>28</sup>

Stephens has the attitude of the true comic spirit. He has that disinterested attitude which as Meredith says:

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

...is closely attached to mankind, with unconcerned observation, unconcerned with the future but only with men's honesty and shapeliness. Whenever they wax out of proportion, are overblown affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, running riot in odolatries, drifting into vanities and absurdities, planning shortsightedly and dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptable laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mixed with conceit, individually or in the bulk, the spirit will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the comic spirit.<sup>29</sup>

He is particularly aware that the pedantic or even highly erudite without the comic spirit usually build a temple of arrogance and pontificate as oracles. They, as the philosophers who could stand no noise but their own conversation and "even if it [any other sound] was made by a bird, a breeze, or a shower of rain, grew angry and demanded it be abolished,"<sup>30</sup> have neglected to look upon themselves and consequently have irritable and boring personalities, a sin of the first order in Stephens' book.

Stephens' humor, though it includes risible pathos, the fantastic, irony, and even at times satire, is essentially intellectual comedy. The author's sharp sensitivity perceives incongruities and "will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them followed by volleys of silvery

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<sup>29</sup>Meredith, p. 86.

<sup>30</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 6.

laughter." There is no scorn or brutishness or contempt in Stephens as these attitudes are alien to his whimsical nature. His work gives rise rather to sympathy, understanding, and, out of them, good fellowship. He is the comic spirit incarnate. And as Meredith said, "To perceive the spirit is a step toward civilization; to shrink from being an object of it is a step in cultivation."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Meredith, p. 88.

## CHAPTER IV

### PATHOS INTO CATHARSIS

In art, pathos is the representation of a human or animal experience which arouses in the observer feelings of pity, sympathy, and tender sorrow; and it differs from sentimentality in being void of excess and, even more important, of affectation. Sentimentalism as we have come to connote it may be recognized by its speciosity, or, more exactly, its essential selfishness masquerading as noble emotion, as manifest by Clarissa's "noble" letters of self-deprecation and her subsequent rejection of life in Richardson's novel. Pathos in art affords the observer with a sympathetic feeling of affinity with that which he observes; sentimentalism, on the contrary, leaves the observer in a tear-dripping detachment, separate from humanity, and feeling woefully sorry for himself. The following awakens sympathetic feelings of affinity with the observed--without any excess, or speciosity, or masquerading. The philosopher, having been on his journey long days and nights, returns home a new man to his hitherto vixenish virago of a wife who, recognizing the change--he had previously expressed no love for her--in his attitude, becomes upon the moment a loving and humble wife, but before the



poor man has time to fill his hungry belly, he is taken away by three policemen. On the way to the jail the leprecauns harass the trio of policemen and their prisoner, who, without any particular effort, escapes to wander in thought through the dark wood. A leprecaun tugging at his trouser leg speaks to him:

"Noble sir, you are terrible hard to get into conversation with. I have been talking to you for the last long time and you won't listen." The philosopher then, upon the constraint of the leprecaun, joins a group of them in a dark thicket where he finds also his wife.]

"When I put the children to bed," said the Thin Woman, "I came down the road in your wake with a basin of stirabout, for you had no time to take your food, God help you! And I was thinking you must have been hungry.

"While I was going along," she continued, "I met these good people and when I told them what happened they came with me to see if anything could be done. The time they ran out of the hedge to fight the policemen I wanted to go with them, but I was afraid the stirabout would be spilt."

The Philosopher licked his lips. "I am listening to you, my love," said he.

"So I had to stay where I was with the stirabout under my shawl--"

"Did you slip then, dear wife?"

"I did not indeed," she replied. "I have the stirabout with me this moment. It's rather cold, I'm thinking, but it's better than nothing at all," and she placed the bowl in his hands.

"I put sugar in it," said she shyly, "and currants, and I have a spoon in my pocket."

"It tastes well," said the Philosopher, and he cleaned the basin so speedily that his wife wept because of his hunger.<sup>1</sup>

In the following passage there is true pathos, for while we observe these two creatures, the lively little puppy and the lonely old, tottering woman, finding delight in each other, we sense the inherent poignancy of life and feel an affinity with these creatures and indeed with all creatures. We are disposed, with tender emotions, to be concerned with all beings, and this, of course, is Stephens' objective. Even a casual reader could not help sensing the quick, sharp poignancy of this delineation. The philosopher meets an old woman with stones in her shoes. Together they come to the house where the old woman hopes to beg a cup of tea:

A little puppy dog came from behind the house and approached them cautiously. Its intentions were friendly but it had already found that amicable advances are sometimes indifferently received, for, as it drew near, it wagged its dubious tail and rolled humbly on the ground. But very soon the dog discovered that here was no evil, for it trotted over to the old woman and without any more preparation jumped into her lap.

The old woman grinned at the dog--"Ah, you thing you!" said she, and she gave it her finger to bite. The delighted puppy chewed her bony finger, and then instituted a mimic warfare against a piece of rag that fluttered from her breast, barking and growling in joyous excitement, while the old woman fondled and hugged it.

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<sup>1</sup>James Stephens, The Crock of Gold (New York, 1930), p. 171.

The door of the house opposite opened quickly, and a woman with a frost-bitten face came out.

"Leave that dog down," said she.

The old woman grinned humbly at her. "Sure, Ma'am, I wouldn't hurt the little dog, the thing!"

"Put that dog down and go about your business--the likes of you ought to be arrested."<sup>2</sup>

In The Crock of Gold Stephens depicts the old widow bemoaning her lonely fate, but he has her speaking with such heart-sent candour that even in her moaning she has a certain human nobleness--she asks not for return of youth but merely a cup of tea--and she manifests both sincere feeling and human frailty. In a stroke Stephens almost achieves the powerful effect of tragedy. He arouses both pity and terror, which Joyce defines as follows:

Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause.<sup>3</sup>

Let me attempt to clarify this. Not only does Stephens induce tender feelings of sympathy and sorrow, but he comes very close to effecting Aristotelian catharsis, the result of the union of pity and terror. The following quotation results in this very singular effect:

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>3</sup>James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York, 1928), p. 239.

"Ah, God be with me," said she, "an old woman on a stick, that hasn't a place in the wide world to go or a neighbour itself...I wish I could get a cup of tea, so I do. I wish to God I could get a cup of tea...Me sitting down in my own little house, with the white table-cloth on the table, and the butter in the dish, and the strong, red tea in the tea-cup; and me pouring cream into it, and, maybe telling the children not to be wasting the sugar, the things! and himself saying he'd got to mow the big field today, or that the red cow was going to calve, the poor thing! and that if the boys went to school, who was going to weed the turnips--and me sitting drinking my strong cup of tea, and telling him where that old trapesing hen was laying...ah God be with me! an old creature hobbling along the roads on a stick. I wish I was a young girl again, so I do, and himself coming courting me, and him saying I was a real nice little girl surely, and nothing would make him happy or easy at all but me to be loving him. Ah the kind man that he was, to be sure, the kind, decent man...and Sorce Reilly to be trying to get him from me, and Kate Finnegan with her bold eyes looking after him in the chapel; and him to be saying that along with me they were only a pair of old nanny goats...And then me to be getting married and going home to me own little house with my man--ah, God be with me! and him kissing me, and laughing, and frightening me with his goings on. Ah the kind man, with his soft eyes, and his nice voice, and his jokes and laughing, and him thinking the world and all of me--ay, indeed... And the neighbours to be coming in and sitting round the fire in the night time, putting the world through each other, and talking about France and Russia and them other queer places, and him holding up the discourse like a learned man, and them all listening to him and nodding their heads at each other, and wondering at his education and all; or, maybe the neighbours to be singing, or him making me sing the Coulin, and him to be proud of me...And then him to be killed on me with a cold on his chest...Ah, the, God be with me, a lone creature on a stick, the sun shining into her eyes and she thirsty--I wish I had a cup of tea, so I do. I wish to God I had a cup of tea and a bit of meat...or, maybe, an egg. A nice fresh egg laid by the speckeldy hen that used to be giving me all the trouble, the thing! Sixteen hens I had, and they were the ones for laying, surely....It's

the queer world, so it is, the queer world--ah the things that do happen for no reason at all...oh, God be with me! I wish there weren't stones in my boots, so I do, and I wish to God I had a cup of tea and a fresh egg. Ah, glory be, my old legs are getting tireder every day, so they are. Wissha, one time--when himself was in it--I could go about the house all day long, cleaning the place, and feeding the pigs, and the hens and all, and then dance half of the night, so I could; and himself proud of me..."<sup>4</sup>

This passage not only, as Joyce says, unites us with the sufferer, which by itself is pathos, but carries us beyond a feeling for the individual, an affinity with the individual, to a universalized emotion wherein we are conscious of the oneness of humanity, of the universality of sensibility; and it induces a terror which comes from the intuitive grasp of the essential tragedy of life or, as Joyce says, unites us with the secret cause and consequently affords a comfortable feeling in the apprehension that one is not alone, that all humanity is with one.

Subconsciously all intelligent people are aware of this tragic element of life, which broods like a shadow beneath their light antic masks, and that is why they realize so much pleasure in observing tragedy; the consciousness of the tragic in life is then intensified, but, at the same time, there is established a feeling of affinity with mankind which destroys one's sense of separateness; and man would be anything but alone. There is a sad delight in catharsis.

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<sup>4</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, pp. 89-91.

The tangible shadow of the apparent futility of life which has always dampened the light of life has become, for the moment, broadened and intensified. All is shadow. Yet fear of loneliness is gone. The darkness is ineluctable, true, and that is sad; but just as clearly as the vague but essentially tragic element of life has invaded our consciousness, so has the essential unity of all beings been discovered.

Man, conscious of his fear and his ignorance and his insignificance in the face of inscrutable forces, is while experiencing catharsis aware of his oneness with mankind, with animals, with nature, and with force; hence his sense of separateness is delightfully demolished. What life is or leads to, he still does not know; but two realizations lend him delicious balm; first, the forces are absolute, beyond comprehension, and remorseless; and second, he is not alone but hand in hand with all sentient creatures may with serenity front the inevitable.

In recapitulation it is seen that pity has been induced by the arresting of the mind "in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human suffering" and uniting it with the human sufferer. Recognizing the universal quality of the old woman's sufferings, we feel at one with her. Then terror is induced as our minds are united, as Joyce says, with the secret cause, which may be defined as that aspect of existence which compels us unconsciously to aspire to god-like omniscience and independence while by our very

immutable and inescapable natures we can know only relatively and are, rather than absolute, innately gregarious and mutually dependent. We are a mass of contradictions doomed to be ever foreign to the perfection to which we aspire, compelled to live a life of wonder, beauty, and love, always aware that we must grow old and die, ever frustrated by the inachievable yet irrepressible nagging of those inherited aspirations.

Here again is a shorter but equally trenchant thrust into the sensibilities, yet note the rapier delicacy, the complete absence of gross cudgel heaviness. There is here the power of truth, of the universality of emotion, of the irresistible essence of time, of the inescapable insignificance of the individual--except as he fits into the whole.

An old man in jail is telling to the philosopher a story of how he intended to propose to his landlady's daughter, who had gone out--he thought--to see a girl friend. He had that evening received a letter informing him that he had been fired because of advancing age. For the first time he really looks at himself in the mirror and sees:

A strange face in the glass. How wrinkled it was! There were only a few hairs on the head and they were grey ones. There was a constant twitching of the lips and the eyes were deep-set, little and dull. He sat there for a long time at his window staring into the blackness of the night. The rain was falling heavily, but they [the girl he wished to marry and her beau] didn't seem to mind it. There was a big puddle of water close to the kerb,

and the girl, stepping daintily as a cat, went round this, but the young man stood for a moment beyond it. He raised both arms, clenched his fists, swung them, and jumped over the puddle. Then he and the girl stood looking at the water, apparently measuring the jump. I could see them plainly by the street lamp. They were bidding each other goodbye. The girl put her hand to his neck and settled the collar of his coat, and while her hand rested on him the young man suddenly and violently flung his arms about her and hugged her; then they kissed and moved apart. The man walked to the rain puddle and stood there with his face turned back laughing at her, and then he jumped straight into the middle of the puddle and began to dance up and down in it, the muddy water splashing up to his knees....When she came into the house, I bolted my door and gave no answer to her knock.<sup>5</sup>

There is more than mere pathos in these passages. Pathos, or pity as Joyce says, is that which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human suffering and unites it with the human sufferer; but the two above quoted passages of Stephens, as has been shown, go beyond this uniting with the sufferer and result also, as does true tragedy, in the Aristotelian sense, in uniting the mind with the secret cause. The observer not only identifies himself with the sufferer but, in a stroke, becomes aware that hand in hand with all sentient beings he is fronted by an inscrutable and ineluctable force. The two emotions, pity and terror, when induced by such universal stimuli as the lamentings of the old widow and the observations of the old man enamoured of the young girl, appearing as coevals, consummate into catharsis, which, it follows

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 192.



from the preceding, grows out of the realization of the essential brotherhood of all sentient beings. This realization annihilates the individual's sense of separateness, a sense he has, since the moment of his personal awareness, struggled with in the darkness of his soul. Once this sense of unity with existence has been established, the observer, aware of the transiency of youth, of the imminence of death, feels himself humbled in the face of forces he cannot comprehend; but intensely conscious of his oneness with all sentient beings, aware of his being not separate but a part of a whole, he sees not only himself but all of humanity humbled. His personal feelings of either inferiority or superiority with respect to the other parts are obliterated; he has, in a word, been abstracted out of his little ego. He sees not himself and other parts but only a highly compacted whole. The idea of the unity of all beings has been poured into and fills his consciousness, and he feels himself a part of this whole which, faced by that beyond the comprehension of any of its components, is working toward a goal not seen but only dimly sensed by intuition. This then is the pleasure: I am part of a whole confronted by an influencing force it cannot comprehend; therefore, this terrible load of responsibility to myself which I always know and to others which I occasionally know has been taken from the shoulders of my consciousness, and I can now know a peace of mind I have always reached for but never grasped.

It is true that many philosophies would not feel at home in such an atmosphere. The existentialists, who believe that man is responsible not only to himself but to his fellow man, would, like Plato, oppose an art which produced such an emotion, which, as we have seen, inclines one to a pleasurable state of acquiescence, of smiling serenity, an elevated humility resulting in a neutral attitude, neither positive or negative, a stasis. This emotion, however, forms the essence of Stephens' pathos.

The proclivity to portray pathos with this singular effect is rarely found; the achievement of success in the attempt is yet rarer. Chekhov accomplished it in short stories like "Vanka." Steinbeck did it in chapter XV on the truck stop in The Grapes of Wrath. Many have attempted it only to flounder in sloughs of sentimentality to emerge slimy with dishonor, but I have seen only in Chekhov the perfection of treatment found in Stephens, as the finely wielded rapier of pathos directed by a sound and well exercised intellect pierces the realm of terror and in a magic note culminates in catharsis.

## CHAPTER V

### STEPHENS' STYLE

#### Part I--General Characteristics

Although Longinus said that the judgment of style is the last and crowning fruit of long experience,<sup>1</sup> he in an essay on style outlined, listed, and categorized every aspect of word-usage and arrangement which added dignity and distinction to the plain meaning. The effort in itself proved that he felt that there were techniques which could be learned by both reader and writer and which would assist each in his particular occupation.

He indicated that the innate qualities essential to the creation of the sublime are elevated concepts and vehement passion. We must, however, make a distinction here between "style" and Longinus' sublime. Stephens would not rank in the sublime of Longinus, and no one is better aware of this than Stephens himself. The Irishman's realization of this fact is made clear by his own comment: "In referring to artists I do not refer here to Shakespeare or Dante or their

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<sup>1</sup>Cassius Longinus, A Treatise Concerning Sublimity (Oxford, 1926), p. 11.

peers. Such men stand above comparison or criticism, and possess a technic which lesser men can no more manipulate than they can play marbles with mountains."<sup>2</sup> Not only does this comment issue from but five feet off the ground, but it admirably manifests the peculiar terseness which is the stamp and signature of Stephens' style. Elevated concepts, though they can certainly and easily be found, are not consistent in Stephens as with men like Homer, Dante, and Milton; nor is there in him but very rarely "vehement passion." There is, in point of fact, diametrically opposed to vehement passion, an insouciance which stems from his whimsical mind and breaks into the darkness of seriousness as a puppy barking into the bleakness of an old people's home. Nevertheless, the style used in the quotation "possess a technic which lesser men can no more manipulate than they can play marbles with mountains," though not sublime, undeniably is style. It has distinction; it has, too, that aspect of the sublime, unforgettability. Generally, style is that particular word-choice and casting which give individuality to a work and that power to move which is the mark of real literature. I shall attempt to bring out aspects of Stephens' delivery which are distinctive, effective, and unforgettable.

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<sup>2</sup>Stephens quoted by Estella R. Taylor in Modern Irish Writers (Lawrence, Kansas, 1954), p. 71.

Though no one would claim that Stephens' style is essentially classic, no study of style could ignore the classical standards of the combination of clarity without meanness. The following quotation is an illustration of that clarity:

The man stalked close and grabbed the dog by the scruff of the neck. It hung between his finger and thumb with its tail tucked between its legs and its eyes screwed round on one side in amazement.<sup>3</sup>

The image is vivid as a result of word-choice and detail. Stephens is always lucid and simple in his expression, is never commonplace, and rarely uses a complex word where a simple one will do. The following description of Mary in The Demi-Gods is undeniably a vivid, poetic, and unforgettable one, and it is remarkable both for its piercing insight and intensity of feeling simply and effortlessly expressed.

For she was a strong girl. She was big in build and bone, and she was beautiful and fearless. Framed in a rusty shawl, her face leaped out instant and catching as a torch in darkness; under her clumsy garments one divined a body to be adored as a revelation; she walked carelessly as the wind walks, proudly as a young queen trained in grandeur. She could leap from where she stood, as a wild-cat that springs terribly from quietude; she could run and pause at full flight like a carven statue. Each movement of hers was complete and lovely in itself; when she lifted a hand to her hair the free attitude was a marvel of composure; it might never have begun, and might never

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<sup>3</sup>James Stephens, The Crock of Gold (New York, 1930), p. 89.

cease, it was solitary and perfect; when she bent to the brazier she folded to such an economy of content that one might have thought her half her size and yet perfect; and had that beauty which raises the mind of man to an ecstasy which is murderous if it be not artistic; and she was so conscious of her loveliness that she could afford to forget it, and so careless that she never used it as a weapon or a plea.<sup>4</sup>

The similes, "she walked carelessly as the wind walks," and "she could leap from where she stood, as a wild-cat that springs terribly from quietude," and "she could pause at full flight like a carven statue," are, though simple, singularly effective. What is more careless than the wind? What can leap like a wild-cat from quietude? What is more motionless than a carven statue?

Most of Stephens' similes are even more admirably propitious, as is this one:

They were sundered a little while from their eternal arithmetic. The grasping hands were lying as quietly as the paws of a sleeping dog.<sup>5</sup>

There are numerous other similes which I shall later bring to the support of Stephens as a Celtic magician; however, let us examine a few similes which though ineffective are noticeably rare in Stephens' work.

But ten paces beyond it was a rubble of bush and rock, unkempt as a beggarman's beard.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>James Stephens, The Demi-Gods (New York, 1914), pp. 71-72.

<sup>5</sup>James Stephens, Here are Ladies (New York, 1916), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup>James Stephens, Etched in Moonlight (New York, 1928), p. 100.

Although a beggarman's beard is probably not well combed and trimmed, it is indeed difficult to conjure up an image of bush and rock similar to a beggarman's several day's growth.

There is also in Stephens this weak simile:

And having expressed itself, my will set in that determination as a rock is set in a stream.<sup>7</sup>

Anyone who has waded a stream knows that the rocks therein are not "set," as the author implied, but instead are rather quick to shift or roll beneath the most cautious boot, affording, if any, a most precarious footing. The two preceding similes were the only faulty and inefficacious ones I managed to find. I point them out as they serve as admirable contrasts to the magic of his more numerous and propitious expressions, which will be brought out in the section on the Celtic quality in Stephens.

If, however, we are to compare Stephens' style with the best, we can with honesty and humility observe a few places wherein he falls short. The following is an example of what Ruskin would refer to as a pathetic fallacy, since trees neither have hands nor do they dare the winds.

The road was winding like a ribbon in and out of the mountains. On either side there were hedges and bushes,--little, stiff trees which held their foliage in their hands and dared the winds snatch a leaf from that grip.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>8</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 86.

This description was involved in a situation wherein the philosopher was walking along a lonely country road on an eerie night, and it should be noted that Ruskin himself admits a justifiable fallacy, wherein the distortion is a result of reasonable and appropriate emotion. This particular case of trees holding leaves in their hands and daring the winds is one of the rare instances where Stephens' intellect or true perception of what he observes is overcome by his emotion or his delight, perhaps even vanity, for turning phrases. The pathetic fallacy wherein the writer allows his emotions to unduly distort his reason seems also to be in this:

After a time he was nearly worn out with cold and weariness, but he dared not sit down anywhere; the darkness was so intense that it frightened him, and the overwhelming crafty silence frightened him also.<sup>9</sup>

Here again we are pleased by a distortion of the truth which has resulted from a man's emotion overriding his understanding. The silence is, of course, not "crafty." Yet is it not obvious that the author wishes us to be aware of the fact that it is the frightened man who sees craftiness in the silence?

The following is an even better example of a distortion of fact by emotion, which, however, is not here a pathetic

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 104.



fallacy, as Stephens makes it clear that it is a love-sick girl and not the author who sees the world in this manner:

The sky was amazing blue. It had never struck her before, but there was a colour in the firmament before which one might fall down and worship. Sunlight was not the hot glare which it had been: it was rich, generous, it was inexpressibly beautiful. The colour and scent of flowers became more varied. The world emerged as from shrouds and cerements. It was tender and radiant, comeliness lived everywhere, and goodwill. Laughter! The very ground bubbled with it; the grasses waved their hands, the trees danced and curtsied to one another with gentle dignity, and the wind lurched down the path with its hat on the side of its head and its hands in its pockets, whistling like her younger brother.<sup>10</sup>

The simile "whistling like her younger brother" is made even more effective by the metaphoric description of the wind "lurching down the path with its hat on the side of its head and its hands in its pockets."

The following metaphor, for simple perfection, would be difficult to match. The thin woman of Inas McGrath, wife of the philosopher in The Crock of Gold, after finding that her innocent husband had been abducted by the police, works herself into a rage and goes off down the road, apparently intent on his rescue and their annihilation.

She strode in the centre of the road, a very volcano of silence, thinking twenty thoughts at the one moment, so that the urgency of her desire kept her terribly quiet.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Stephens, Here are Ladies, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 201.

Here is a prolonged metaphor on a man overly submissive to his wife but finally rebelling as he sees a train departing.

He looked again at the hour. It was one minute to two o'clock, he was to be back before three; and then something happened. The whole white world became red. The oldest seas in the world went suddenly lashing into storm. An ocean of blood thundered into his head, and the noise of that primitive flood, roaring from what prehistoric gulfs, deafened him at an instant. The waves whirled his feet from under him. He went foaming up the steps, was swept violently into the ticket office, and was swirled away like a bobbing cork into the train. A guard tried to stop him for the train was already taking its pace, but one cannot keep out the tide with a ticket-puncher. The guard was overwhelmed, caught in the backwash, and swirled somewhere, anywhere, out of sight and knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Comparing the man's reaction to the tide is not only vivid and well carried out but is indeed appropriate, as it complements the innate feeling a man experiences upon realization of his uxoriousness.

Here is a figure of speech which is both intellectually stimulating and imaginatively exciting, as a young girl passes an aging man, who for the first time becomes aware of his lost youth:

"She did not look at me," said he, and his mind folded its hands across its stomach, and sat down, while he went forward in the sunlight to do his errands.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Stephens, Here Are Ladies, p. 183.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

There is here, also, an extraordinarily propitious image aroused by this figure:

For scarcely a week passed but some person came through the pine wood with his brows in a tangle of perplexity.<sup>14</sup>

I would like to bring out the following expressions as examples of the terse perfection of Stephens' style. They are effective and distinctive and typically Stephensian:

The poor lady's inside curled up in fear and had started to uncurl in screams when she felt a hand laid gently on her arm, and, "Don't make a noise, or I'm caught," said a voice, whereupon, and with exceeding difficulty, she closed her mouth while the scream went sizzling through her teeth in little gasps.<sup>15</sup>

Her eyes were straining up the street.<sup>16</sup>

Her hands were sharp, quick hands, seeming all knuckle when she closed them and all fingers when she opened them again.<sup>17</sup>

She knew him on the doorstep, and her blood froze in terror and boiled again in shame.<sup>18</sup>

He hung his monstrous look on her.<sup>19</sup>

Here also is a treatment which adds something to the "plain saying" of the thing. It, as almost every expression of Stephens', seems to extract the very essence of the

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<sup>14</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup>Stephens, Here Are Ladies, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup>James Stephens, Mary, Mary (Boston, 1912), p. 58.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

subject; it puts the reader's finger of perception plumb on the pulse of the situation; it is quick, sure, and inescapable:

"Virtue," said Pan, "is the performance of pleasant actions." The philosopher held the statement for a moment on his forefinger.<sup>20</sup>

There is also this example of word-coinage found in Stephens which is more than mere innovation; it is a useful and risible addition to the language.

Meanwhile it is interesting to speculate on the future of an abstinent nation whose politics have the misfortune of being guided by a Peerage instead of a Beerage, and whose national destiny is irrationally divorced from the interests of the trade.<sup>21</sup>

Much of Stephens' work drifts intangibly in the nebula of fantasy, but always, before one feels lost in a dream, the artist, with a touch of realism, imbues his creation with credibility. In a stroke the fantastic is mundane; or rather we, in an instant, are taken out of the microcosm and into Tira na-Og, the land of eternity. This quality is, in point of fact, representative of Stephens' work. He crosses the line between reality and fantasy with an amazing insouciance which results in conversations with both gods and animals, leaving the reader with a feeling of oneness with all existence.

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<sup>20</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup>Stephens, Here Are Ladies, p. 304.

The goat pushed his way behind this growth and disappeared. Then the children, curious to see where he had gone, pushed through also. Behind the brush they found a high narrow opening, and when they had rubbed their legs, which smarted from the stings of nettles, thistles, and gorse prickles, they went into the hole which they thought was a place the goat had for sleeping in on cold, wet nights. After a few paces they found the passage was quite comfortably big, and then they saw a light, and in another moment they were blinking at the god Pan and Caitilin Ni Marrachu.<sup>22</sup>

In the following passage the philosopher is talking with Meehawl Mac Muarrachu about the man's lost washingboard. The philosopher had drawn his chair so close to Meehawl that their four knees were touching, and he laid his hands on both of Mac Murrachu's knees. A long fustian and consequently humorous catechism ensues:

"Did you cut down a thorn bush recently?"

"I'd sooner cut my eye out," said Meehawl, "and go about wall-eyed as Lorcan O'Mualain's ass: I would that. Did you ever see his ass, sir? It--"

"I did not," said the Philosopher. "Did you kill a robin redbreast?"

"Never," said Meehawl. "By the pipers," he added, "that old skinny cat of mine caught a bird on the roof yesterday."

"Hah!" cried the Philosopher, moving, if it were possible, even closer to his client, "now we have it. It is the Leprecauns of Gort na Cloca Mora took your washboard. Go there at once. There is a hole under a tree in the south-east of the field. Try what you shall find in that hole."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 177.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

Notice how the conversation which deals with wild superstitions and leprecauns becomes believable through the subtle application of a realistic detail.

Before stating any conclusions concerning Stephens' style, I shall attempt in the next section of this chapter to analyze the forementioned Celtic quality, which I feel is not only an integral part of his style but a component so important that it is worthy of particular treatment.

### Part II--The Celtic Quality in Stephens

Matthew Arnold in his "Essay Concerning the Study of Celtic Literature," which in reality is an erudite attempt to prove the potential superiority of an English aggregate compacted of Germanic, Latin, and Celtic components, adduces the following illustration of Celtic "magic," which he says is a result of sentiment, love of beauty, intimacy with nature, and spirituality, all aspects of the Celtic temperament. The quick dropping of blood is called:

...faster than the fall of the dewdrop from the blade of reed-grass upon the earth, when the dew of June is at the heaviest.<sup>24</sup>

And thus is the heroine of an old Celtic tale described:

More yellow was her hair than the flower of the broom, and her skin was whiter than the foam of the wave, and fairer were her hands and her

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<sup>24</sup>Matthew Arnold, On the Study of Celtic Literature (London, 1903), p. 133.

fingers than the blossoms of the wood-anemony  
amidst the spray of the meadow fountains. (from  
Peradar, The Song of Evrawc)<sup>25</sup>

Arnold does not attempt, as does Longinus, to analyze exactly what it is in these word-choices and arrangements which so strike the reader, nor does he try to analyze what it is the reader feels; he merely gives us these examples, manifests much admiration for them, and, something he rarely does, edges out the back door leaving the intellectual house void, as he parts with the unenlightening assertion-- especially for one who wrote "Sweetness and Light"--that it is pure "magic." Once we understand a magician's necromancy it ceases to be magic. Magic implicitly denotes phenomena outside our understanding. Arnold is, then, in point of fact, saying that these things are admirable, somehow even great--he quotes from Shakespeare and Keats to give examples--but by his use of "magic" tacitly affirms that he does not know how or why.

This "magic" quality appears to be in the following:

...And then she looked, and I was baffled anew;  
for her eye was as light, as calm as inexpressive  
as the bright twinkle of a raindrop that hangs  
and shivers on a twig.<sup>26</sup>

Let us see if we can arrange a different simile of the same light, calm, inexpressive eye with a similar effect. Her

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>26</sup>Stephens, Etched in Moonlight, p. 87.

eye was as light, as calm, as inexpressive as a bull snorting and pawing the ground, looking red-eyed at the matador. This is obviously out of place; it might be considered humorous, and would be effective only if one were trying to show how calm, light, and inexpressive the eye was not.

Let us try another. Her eye was as light, as calm, as inexpressive as a locomotive that stands and steams on a rainy day. Again we have a failure. Such an image is not light, nor quite calm, nor could it be argued inexpressive.

Once again: her eye was as light, as calm, as inexpressive as the face of a corpse, its nose holes upturned and dark but oblivious to the almost oppressively heavy aroma of the flowers bunched all around. This is better, but still a failure. The image might easily be construed as inexpressive, but lightness and calmness are not attributes of death, or we would probably find that anathematized state considerably more attractive; and, instead of a light, calm, inexpressive eye, we are confronted by a cadaver.

Let us try just once more. Her eye was as light, as calm, as inexpressive as a small white puff of cloud poised close on a still day to the bright-shining sun. This comes much closer, for the cloud is all three, light, calm, and inexpressive; however, it is a bit large to be likened to an eye. We see those qualities in both the cloud and the eye, but they have been obfuscated rather than clarified. We



know less about the eye than we did before, and have become, if anything, confused in our idea of its calmness, lightness, and inexpressiveness.

To return to Stephens' image, "Her eye was as light, as calm, as inexpressive as the bright twinkle of a raindrop that hangs and shivers on a twig." Here we have it! And simply because the very essence of those "eye" qualities of lightness, calmness, and inexpressiveness has been completely grasped by the fingers of the artist's intellect, either through dint of intellectual exercise or intuitive grasp. How Stephens arrived at "the bright twinkle of a raindrop that hangs and shivers on a twig" only he can reveal. The word-choice and arrangement are important and do add to the effectiveness of the expression since we see that--her eye was as light, as calm, as inexpressive as a shining raindrop that twinkles and quivers on a twig--or--as a twinkling raindrop that hangs shivering on a twig--or--as the bright shiver of a twinkling raindrop hanging from a twig--though very nearly the same as the original lack something as surely as the graceful movements of a good fighter fall short of those of the champion, as surely as a realistic painting of a colorful sunset fails to equal the reality, as surely as the beauty of a woman graceful in form and even in disposition falls short of the beauty of a woman with nobility of mind. The important element, however, is not the diction but the choice of comparison. The diction enables us

to "see" the raindrop, but it is the intrinsic quality of the raindrop which enables us in a flash to know the essence of the light, calm, inexpressive eye of which Stephens speaks.

Here is another example of what one might refer to as "magic":

A thought is a real thing and words are only its raiment, but a thought is as shy as a virgin; unless it is fittingly apparelled we may not look on its shadowy nakedness: it will fly from us and only return again in the darkness crying in a thin, childish voice which we may not comprehend until, with aching minds, listening and divining, we at last fashion for it those symbols which are its protection and its banner.

It [the thought she could not give voice to] was like the edge of a little wind which stirred her tresses but could not lift them, or the first white peep of the dawn which is neither light nor darkness. But she listened, not with her ears but with her blood. The fingers of her soul stretched out to clasp a stranger's hand, and her disquietude was quickened through with an eagerness which was neither physical nor mental, for neither her body nor her mind was definitely interested. Some dim region between these two grew alarmed and watched and waited and did not sleep or grow weary at all.<sup>27</sup>

Here again the similes are perfections of perception revealing an artist with his forefinger on the pulse of the thing. A thought "as shy as a virgin" fitting perfectly with the concept of words as raiment, and the thought itself having a being which refuses to show itself naked. And "return again in the darkness crying in a thin childish voice which we may

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<sup>27</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 39.

not comprehend" has also admirably extracted the very essence of what we feel in attempting to put into words a feeling which pervades us but finds no expression, or, to use Stephens' idea, finds no words in which to clothe itself but nags at our "aching minds." How well we all recognize this sensation. The essence of the thought is its intangible yet undeniable existence. What then is more intangible and, yet since perceived, undeniable than the edge of that "little wind which stirred her tresses but could not lift them," or "the first white peep of dawn which is neither light nor darkness"?

Observe another bit of "magic":

Here through the sunny days the years had passed in a slow, warm thoughtlessness wherein, without thinking, many thoughts had entered into her mind and many pictures hung for moments like birds in the thin air.<sup>28</sup>

Images in the mind are here likened to "pictures hung for moments like birds in the thin air." Again the very essence of the thing observed has been extracted. What better could one compare with the shifting images in the mind? Conjure up, if you will, right at this moment, a picture in your mind's eye. It even drifts or slides from one's mental vision as birds in the thin air drift out of ocular focus.

In Mary, Mary Stephens writes of Phoenix Park wherein the children play and:

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

...their laughter disturbs the calm serenity of the scene no more than the flutter of a butterfly's wing.<sup>29</sup>

Again we are struck with the truth of the expression, for what is less disturbing in a pastoral scene than the flutter of a butterfly's wing?

Here Stephens catches a sound which is and is not a sound. This is the kind of expression Arnold would surely have referred to as "magic."

The two women communicated by cracking their knuckles slowly or quickly and by dint of long practice they could make great explosive sounds which were nearly like thunder, and gentler sounds like the tapping of grey ashes on a hearthstone.<sup>30</sup>

If we tried to audiolize the softest, gentlest sound in creation, what better could we do than the "tapping of grey ashes on a hearthstone"? Anyone who has observed the crumble of a bed of ashes knows in an intuitive flash the truth of this. Though we in actuality hear nothing, we see the shift, the movement, the fall, and the spread of the ash; it hits and crumples, changing its form. We know that it must make a sound; so we imagine we hear it; yet our ears are not quite sensitive enough. Still the gentle sound of the tapping of grey ashes is as true as two plus one equalling three.

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<sup>29</sup>Stephens, Mary, Mary, p. 93.

<sup>30</sup>Stephens, The Crock of Gold, p. 6.

In all the preceding examples phenomena pertaining to man or his senses are compared to natural phenomena: an eye to a raindrop, a thought to a virgin, the call of a thought to a thin childish voice, a mental image to a bird in thin air, children's laughter to the flutter of a butterfly's wing, and the sound of softly cracking knuckles to the tapping of grey ashes. There is in all of these similes an intimacy with nature which Arnold observed and noted as being characteristic of the Celtic temperament. This intimacy with nature is undeniably an aspect of Stephens' style. The following passage adequately illustrates Stephens' intimacy with nature:

From the well of forgetfulness he regained the shining words and gay melodies which in his childhood he had delighted in, and these he sang loudly and unceasingly as he marched. The sun had not yet risen but, far away, a quiet brightness was creeping over the sky. The daylight, however, was near the full, one slender veil remaining only of the shadows, and a calm unmoving quietude brooded from the grey sky to the whispering earth. The birds had begun to bestir themselves but not to sing. Now and again a solitary wind feathered the chill air; but for the most part the birds huddled closer in the swinging nests, or under the bracken, or in the tufty grass. Here a faint twitter was heard and ceased. A little farther a drowsy voice called "cheep-cheep" and turned again to the warmth of its wing. The very grasshoppers were silent. The creatures who range in the night had returned to their cells and were setting their households in order, and those who belonged to the day hugged their comfort for but one minute longer. Then the first level beam stepped like a mild angel to the mountain top. The slender radiance brightened and grew strong. The grey veil faded away. The birds leaped from their nest. The grasshoppers awakened and were busy at a stroke. Voice called to voice without ceasing, and, momentarily, a song thrilled for

a few wide seconds. But for the most part it was shatter-chatter they went as they soared and plunged and swept, each bird eager for its breakfast.<sup>31</sup>

With this description Stephens has shown us the beauty he intellectually insists can be realized only through a mating of mind and intuition in love and Divine Imagination, the consummation being Innocence, Adoration, and Happiness. The innocence of the morning seems always to Stephens to be a symbol of the peace of beauty and natural movement of life. Then after wading the light of this dawn and tossing his song on its soft winds, the philosopher meets a group of a farmer and his sons and daughter, shares his cake with them; then they share their provender with him, and we feel all is well; man has plenty of bread and milk; he shares with and loves his fellow, and leaning back contented, we smile with optimism.

It, however, is more than a mere intimacy with nature which results in these magical expressions and their effect. Thoreau was intimate with nature, yet he was incapable of such expression. The "magic" in these expressions is a result of the artist's ability to perceive the essence of a quality in man or an experience of man or a thought of man and then, somehow, search out just that aspect of nature which most closely resembles it and compare the two in such

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 124-25.

a way as the first is made clearer, and an affinity between the two is established. The pleasant feeling elicited upon reading such expressions is a result first of the clarification of the subject upon which the mind has focused; for example, the calmness, lightness, and inexpressiveness of the eye, which after being compared to the bright twinkle of a raindrop that hangs and shivers on a twig, becomes so clear as to need no further elucidation; it effects a startling leap to a finer, surer sense of perception. It must, however, be admitted that, even after analyzing the effectiveness in these expressions, Arnold's use of the word magic is still appropriate, since there is beyond what has been analyzed a nameless residue for which "magic" is as good a word as another. We have, nevertheless, been enlightened and consequently elevated; and there is nothing more satisfying than the realization of an intellectual movement toward truth. These expressions also bring us in a flash to the realization of our innate affinity with nature; we, too, are composed of matter; consequently, we are apt to anthropomorphize, a habit, by the way, of Stephens. The children's laughter disturbs the scene no more than the flutter of a butterfly's wing, and therein the serenity of the scene has found words, raiment, and no longer cries to our aching minds in a thin childish voice. We have a grip on serenity and feel our affinity with nature, both of which are decidedly pleasant.

We see, then, that the effectiveness of Stephens' style is not merely the ability to "use prose as attractively as others use verse,"<sup>32</sup> but it is a result of the artist's ability to perceive the essence of what he is observing and, through his intimacy with natural phenomena, choose exactly that phenomenon which most closely parallels that which is observed and consequently elevate the reader to a like perception. It is the kind of writing which demands much deep thought from the writer but only attention from the reader. Most moderns, preoccupied with cleverness of delivery, evolve "styles" which are unique in a variety of ways but singularly common in the paucity of sound reasoning supporting them. Their works, consequently, evoke like vagaries of concept and feeling and perhaps arouse the reader's own groping senses; but they intrinsically add nothing; the note of truth is rarely sounded; the "magic" image is absent, and piles of words must be waded through and raked aside before a truth is seen, as mounds of sodden leaves in spring before one green blade may freshly show.

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<sup>32</sup>Ernest A Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance (New York, 1916), p. 269.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

As opposed to most accepted writers in this modern era, Stephens manifests an unusual air of optimism, in spite of the fact that he is aware of the evils of society as well as any of his colleagues. Here, without the slightest softening, he depicts the poverty he has seen:

Every morning about six o'clock Mary Makebelieve left her bed and lit the fire. It was an ugly fire to light because the chimney had never been swept, and there was no draught. Also they never had any sticks in the house, and scraps of paper twisted tightly into balls with the last night's cinders placed on them and a handful of small coals strewn on the top were used instead.<sup>1</sup>

And the ugly details of this abject poverty are seen with open eyes:

It was then she went over all the things that had happened on the previous day, and the chances for and against making a little money. At this meal she used to arrange also to have the room repapered and the chimney swept and the rat-holes stopped up--There were three of these, one was on the left side of the fire grate, the other two were under the bed, and Mary Makebelieve had lain awake many a night listening to the gnawing of teeth on the skirting and the scamper of little feet here and there on the floor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James Stephens, Mary, Mary (Boston, 1912), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 9-10.

The following poem also is typical of Stephens' unimpassioned philosophical outlook:

THE STREET BEHIND YOURS

The night droops down upon the street  
 Shade after shade. A solemn frown  
 Is pressing to  
 A deeper hue  
 The houses drab and brown.<sup>3</sup>

Commenting on this attitude Ernest Boyd says:

He sees the squalor of poverty with dispassionate eyes of experience, without bitterness. If the poet were not so bouyant and natural, he might be suspected of cynicism, but the term is quite inapplicable to these tragic little pictures.

Candour and optimism are the springs of insurrection in Stephens. He is no more depressed by what he sees in the gutter than he is abashed by the magnificence of heaven. A strong sense of human fellowship enables him to retain his presence of mind even in his relation with the superhuman.<sup>4</sup>

A proof of the unimpassioned clarity of Stephens' outlook is made more apparent when seen in the light of Joyce's view of the same Dublin.

The lane behind the terrace was waterlogged, and as he went down it slowly, choosing his steps amid heaps of wet rubbish, he heard a mad nun screeching in the nuns' madhouse beyond the wall: "Jesus! O Jesus! Jesus!"

He shook the sound out of his ears by an angry toss of his head and hurried on stumbling through the mouldering offal, his heart already bitten by an ache of loathing and bitterness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>James Stephens, Collected Poems (New York, 1926), p. 203.

<sup>4</sup>Ernest A. Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance (New York, 1916), p. 269.

<sup>5</sup>James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York, 1928), p. 134.

or this just as bitter description:

He drained his third cup of watery tea to the dregs and set to chewing the crusts of fried bread that were scattered near him, staring into the dark pool of the jar. The yellow dripping had been scooped out like a boghole, and the pool under it brought back to his memory the dark turf-colored water of the bath in Glongowes. The box of pawn tickets at his elbow had just been rifled and he took up idly one after another in his greasy fingers the blue and white docketts, scrawled and sanded and creased, and bearing the name of the pledger as Daly or MacEvoy... Then he put them aside and gazed thoughtfully at the lid of the box, speckled with louse marks, and asked vaguely: "How much is the clock fast now?"<sup>6</sup>

Both Joyce and Stephens were describing, and about the same time, Dublin and its people, but Stephens' Dublin

...is not the tortuous, inimical, Aristotlian minded Dublin of James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist--it is the Dublin of the simple hearted Dubliner: Dublin with its great grey clouds and its poising sea-birds, with its hills and its bay, with its streets that everyone would avoid and with its other streets that everyone promenades; with its greens and its parks and its river-walks--Dublin always friendly.<sup>7</sup>

Before coming to a final conclusion I would like to bring forth this one reference to Stephens' work. This author, Edward Davison, is primarily concerned with Stephens as a poet, and although this study has been concerned only with prose, the following observations, though primarily concerned with his poetry, serve to illuminate an aspect of Stephens' prose and perhaps add cogency to my conclusion:

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>7</sup>Padraic Colum, Introduction in Stephens' Mary, Mary, p. xi.

The poetic genius of James Stephens has won recognition slowly but it was never better founded than during the past two years in America. His wonderful aptitude for prose-romance tends to distract attention from his no less important poetic gifts. His work may be said to deal scarcely with ideas at all. A bird's song, the cry of a snared rabbit and the vital, overwhelming desire to release it, the crooked windings of a goat-path on the side of a hill--these and such are his themes. He seeks only to convey the feeling of an experience, never to describe it in any realistic sense. And, rarest of attributes among the serious poets of today [1926], he has a certain tint of humor that comes to glitter on the edges of his happier moods with such a brightness as belongs only to poetry. It is often faintly ironical as the humor in the Crock of Gold or Deirdre. But the best of James Stephens is to be found in those intense and passionate poems of sympathy, such as "The Snare."

Stephens has definite limitations, but they are limitations of a fairy. He is an elf among modern poets and no line that he has written could discredit the art of Shakespeare himself.<sup>8</sup>

The exuberance is perhaps uncalled for, and, as we saw inceptively, no one is better aware of the impropriety of Mr. Davison's closing statement than is Stephens, who spoke of Shakespeare and Dante and their peers as those who employ techniques "lesser men can no longer manipulate than they can play marbles with mountains."

Stephens, as we have seen, is, with considerable consistency, at least according to the definitions in Meredith's essay, the comic spirit incarnate; his philosophy, although neither practical nor absolute is both

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<sup>8</sup>Edward Davison, "Three Irish Poets--A. E., W. B. Yeats, and James Stephens," The English Journal, XV (May, 1926), 321.

emotionally moving and rationally tenable; his style is distinctive, effective, often unforgettable, and contains that Celtic element which was found to be the result not only of an intimacy with nature and a felicity in language but also the ability to perceive the essence of that observed; and, finally, after close examination, the pathos in Stephens, through his preoccupation with universals and the essential unity of mankind, is found culminating in catharsis.

It becomes obvious upon reconsideration of the observations brought out concerning Stephens' humor, philosophy, style, and pathos that the man's works are worthy of our attention. Although we have become conditioned to a pessimistic kind of realism to the extent that we seem able to look with favor on nothing else, it would appear wisdom on our part to broaden our view by accepting, with an open mind, works of a different nature; and, especially in the face of our latest scientific discoveries which leave us, as we have seen, in a universe composed of atoms manifesting apparent chaos, it would be particularly ludicrous for us to adamantly demand and read only one kind of literary expression. I realize that this argument could be employed to support the reading of any kind of expression such as comic books, cheap westerns, and similar efforts; but I adduce it only to liberalize the reader's general attitude.

Stephens' work can broaden our perspective, arouse our laughter, and plunge us into vicissitudes of emotion, even

catharsis; and all this conveyed by a style which is distinctive, effective, and in many places unforgettable. Is realism, in reality, so worthy of our admiration? How is it that the word "curiosity" has come to bear a pejorative connotation? Is the fantasy to be relegated to the nursery, its symbol sneered at, and the delight it can afford lost? Stephens himself gives this his own answer:

He had never been questioned, and, the precedent being absent, he had never questioned himself. Why should he? We live by question and answer, but we do not know the reply to anything until a puzzled comrade bothers us and initiates that divine curiosity which both humbles and uplifts us.<sup>9</sup>

We have gone as far as we can with our photographic realism, with our brutal naturalism. The two movements have served the purpose of awakening us to the poverty and depravity to which the romantics of the nineteenth century were blind. They also freed us from Victorian prudishness. They, most important of all, have made us aware of the common man. But now, observing the various movements, we can sense the extreme in each. Something new must come to our literature, and what better, indeed, what else but a concrescence of the best in that which has preceded? In turning away from realism and naturalism we do not propose to put on blinders, nor has Stephens. It is true that if we

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<sup>9</sup>James Stephens, Here Are Ladies (New York, 1916), p. 5.

walk always with upturned chins we may stumble into bog-  
holes, yet if always with a downturned eye we walk, we may  
never see

That orb'd maiden, with white fire laden,  
Whom mortals call the moon.

Stephens has the inclination to look up as well as down; he  
can say yes as well as no, but never blind, he laughs some-  
times and says--well, maybe!

This view is the broad view which sees life not only as  
cruel, savage, painful, stupid, and ugly, but also perceives  
that it is kind, gentle, joyous, passionate, excruciating,  
noble, and beautiful. This is the view our writers must  
bring us or they do not bring the truth. This is the view  
that will lift us out of our adolescent preoccupation with  
sensual gratification, out of our college sophomore cynicism  
and into a degree of maturity wherein we see both the good  
and the evil in life and are sustained by the knowledge that  
we can by understanding, sympathy, generosity, laughter, and  
love leave this world just a bit better than we found it.  
But even this is too coldly rational for the buoyancy of  
Stephens as he sings:

## DANCE

Left and right and swing around!  
Soar and dip and fall for glee!  
Happy sky, and bird and ground!  
Happy wind and happy tree!  
Happy minions, dancing mad!  
Joy is guide enough for you;  
Cure the world of good and bad;  
and teach us innocence anew!

Good and bad and right and wrong!  
Wave the silly words away!  
There is wisdom--to be strong!  
There is virtue--to be gay!  
Let us sing and dance, until--  
We shall know the final art;  
How to banish good and ill--  
With the laughter of the heart!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Stephens, Collected Poems, p. 24.



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