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The Short Stories of James Stephens

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STEPHENS'S development as a short story writer is interesting because it parallels a certain decisive phase in the evolution of that genre among Irish writers. His first volume, Here Are Ladies, appeared in 1913, one year before Joyce's Dubliners and three years before Corkery's A Munster Twilight. In other words, Stephens's collection antedated the two strong formative influences from which the modern Irish short story took its character. It was from this point on that the great period of the Irish short story — which Frank O'Connor regards as a separate art form — emerged. The lessons of the great continentalists which George Moore had made available to Irish writers a decade before in An Untilled Field (1903) were coming to fruition and being fused to a native genius that was triggered by Joyce and Corkery and that issued in a distinguished line of practitioners from O'Connor and O'Faolain, through Mary Lavin and McLaverty down to such brilliant younger men as James Plunkett.

Hitherto, the Irish short story had none of that highly polished and self-conscious artistry that we now associate with it. Yeats and AE wrote collections of "tales," often very fine but exhibiting no particular respect for the craft as a craft. Usually the stories, like Yeats's about Red Hanrahan, embodied some mystical lesson or externalized some esoteric theme. This sort of story still turns up in Irish anthologies for some reason scarcely connected with literature and strikes one as rather gauche and uneasy beside some taut and formal masterpiece by Mary Lavin or Frank O'Connor — like a man in homespun at a cocktail party. There is a difference in kind between them and the modern short story; a revolution had taken place in between. Here Are Ladies, appearing as it does in 1913, falls somewhere in between the two traditions. It has much of the unself-conscious casualness of the older type of tale. No modern writer, for instance, would encumber a serious collection of his stories with all the interminable blather that sprawls over the last seventy pages of the book under the title "There Is a Tavern in the Town." This is a collection of monologues gleaned from a series of newspaper sketches published in Sinn
Fein, 1909. The pieces issue from the mouth of an old gentleman who discourses with bewildering variety and eccentricity on all sorts of topics and to no purpose whatever. Curiously, they do prove significant later on because it seems that it was from the figure of the old gentleman that Stephens conceived the Philosopher of *The Crock of Gold*. In fact he adapts many of them for the Philosopher’s dialogue and coming from him they take on quite an exciting coherence and vitality. The tedious old cod in the tavern becomes the irresistible old cod in the Dark Wood. This must be one of the few instances in literature where the dialogue of a character was written before the character himself had been called into existence. Apart from “There Is a Tavern in the Town” there is a number of other pieces that might have been profitably excluded, for despite a handful of excellent stories the book as a collection exhibits a bumbling nonchalance that embarrasses criticism.

This is in no way true of *Etched in Moonlight*, his only other collection which appears fifteen years later in 1928. Stephens has been part of the revolution and his whole approach to his art has changed; the stories in the later volume exhibit spareness, austerity and an obvious sense of form. He has developed from a story teller into a short story writer. It is a pity that, as in his poetry, the development and perfection of technique should have coincided with a decline in energy and in optimism. The world of these later stories is sombre and desperate. Ill health, exile and loneliness combined with an arid philosophy had taken their toll and drained him of that creative joy and exuberance that fifteen years before had marked him out as the most promising writer of his generation.

Returning to *Here Are Ladies*, it is important to point out that it presents a professional talent that is absent from the incursion of men like Yeats and Russell into short fiction. Stephens was not a mystical poet condescending momentarily to the lesser form. He was a fiction writer with two successful novels behind him and he had the fiction writer’s precise and observant interest in the objects of his art. He was not concerned with airing preoccupations or embodying myths but in depicting people and telling their stories. When he set out to seriously do this, he did it superbly and, despite my strictures above, there are at least a half dozen stories in this book that
can stand comparison with the best that has been produced by Irish writers.

Stephens's approach to the short story is realist and he seems to have been influenced by writers like George Moore and Galsworthy who had absorbed the powerful contemporary influence of the Russians, especially Turgenev. He deals largely with a world of clerks and typists and their employers, the middle class and the shabby genteel of Dublin. He has moved from the tenement of Mrs. Makebelieve to a series of musty Galsworthyian offices and Chekhovian parlors. His method and technique however are all his own. As in his novels, the type is still dominant. He never tells us more about a character than the bare essentials for the story; he invariably refuses to put a name on a character unless he is forced to do so. For instance, we never learn the name of the young clerk in *The Charwoman's Daughter* and even the policeman would have remained anonymous had it not been necessary to give the name of his aunt.

In *Here Are Ladies*, a volume of thirty-one pieces, only three of the stories contain the names of people. Instead, Stephens prefers to identify his characters by distinguishing traits or features. Here are a few examples of his method.

She was tall and angular. Her hair was red, and scarce, and untidy. Her hands were large and packed all over with knuckles and her feet would have turned inwards at the toes, only that she was aware of and corrected their perversities . . . Her voice was pleasant enough but it was so strong that one fancied there were bones in it. ("Three Angry People")

This is all we are told about the woman but it is all we need to understand that she found her subservient position as a woman intolerable. Again:

She had begun to get thin. Her face was growing sharp and peaked. The steady curve of her cheek had become a little indeterminate. Her chin had begun to sag and her eyes to look a little weary. ("Three Women Who Wept")

This is all we get in physical description of the heroine but it is sufficient to establish that she will prove pathetically vulnerable to a gay and rather heartless young adventurer who seeks sanctuary at her house.
He had a high nose. He looked at one over the collar, so to speak. His regard was very assured and his speech was that short bundle of monosyllables which the subaltern throws to the orderly. He had never been questioned, and, the precedent being absent he had never questioned himself.

Again the character is sketched briefly, almost meagerly, but sufficiently to establish that this man is quite capable of being cuckolded by his clerk and of thus losing his wife without ever comprehending what had happened at all.

This approach to characterization — so like the method of the cartoonist, based as it is on the exaggeration of one feature — has many advantages for the short story. It makes for stringent economy and tautness. All unnecessary matter is excluded; no character is introduced who has not a vital part to play. We learn nothing about the protagonist over and above what is necessary to make his actions meaningful. But on the debit side it has a dehumanizing effect on the characters. In many cases they are not sufficiently rounded and it is difficult to sustain one's interest in characters so grudgingly endowed with flesh and blood. The method is altogether successful in the novels where there is leisure to supply all the endearing details that bring a fictional character to life, but within the more restricted range of his short stories we are too often asked to hang upon the words and actions of an animated idiosyncrasy.

Hand in hand with this effect there is another, though it may in fact be a cause. It is this. With two notable exceptions Stephens's short stories are extremely brief flights. There is no expansiveness or amplitude in them and this is connected, whether as cause or effect, with the tight rein he keeps on his characters. He seldom allows them to talk, preferring the neatness of his own oratio obliqua. We sometimes feel that they have no existence outside the actual events of the story and that within it they have no more life or volition than the author allows them from line to line. In other words, Stephens bears the same relationship to his characters as the puppet master to his puppets; he manipulates them. It wasn't that he could not handle dialogue; whenever he used it he displayed miraculous authenticity. He probably felt that if he let them talk too much they would get out of control and upset the balance of his story. The one story in the piece where dialogue is used ex-
tensively is "Three Lovers Who Lost" (1) and it, in fact, was produced as a one-act play entitled Julia Elizabeth. The dialogue is authentic as anything in O'Casey though it has not his poetic verve and vividness.

This quality of tightness and constraint in Stephens's stories must be viewed in relation to the themes he chooses and it is in the themes that its justification lies. The themes are domestic ones constantly exploring the twisted, involuted conflicts between man and wife. "Spouse maddened by spouse, this is a dominant theme with Stephens," writes Robert Farren of his poetry, and it is even truer of his short stories. The conflict is usually confined to two, the incompatible husband and wife; children seldom appear to complicate the issues and only an occasional lover encroaches. There is a claustrophobic atmosphere generated of necessity, an atmosphere that precludes expansiveness.

The stories, then, are largely an emotional dialogue and they are largely typified and crystallized by his much anthologized poem "Nora Crionna." His obsession with this theme seems to be bound up with a deep-rooted notion he had about an underlying dualism in the universe, a system of polarities. If all his incidental aphorisms were collected, ninety percent of them would be found to deal with the concept. It can be crudely stated thus: the whole world is organized on a system of opposites and these opposites are constantly at war; Spirit versus Matter, God versus Devil, Good versus Evil, and finally the human incarnation of the conflict, Man versus Woman. The law in nature, therefore, is that man and woman are constantly engaged in a war of loving hatred. The struggle proceeds through all his stories and it gets its most extensive and perhaps definitive treatment in the violent tenderness that existed between Patsy McCann and Eileen McCooley in The Demi-Gods. The notion gets its support from his theosophical doctrines, it underlies the thought of Plotinus whom his friend Stephen McKenna was translating, and it recurs in the various mystical systems of the East of which, under AE's influence, Stephens had a devotee's knowledge. However, as he almost certainly spent his youth in the jungle of a Dublin tenement, he may have seen this principle in colorful and brawling action before he found it embodied in a system of thought.
The only stories in *Here Are Ladies* that do not deal with the connubial theme are "There Is a Tavern in the Town," which is not a story at all, "Three Happy Places," which concerns children, and "The Threepenny-Piece," a sort of Marcel Ayméish fantasy that eventually finds its way into the plot of *The Demi-Gods*.

The dominant mood of *Etched in Moonlight* is gloom and pessimism but in *Here Are Ladies*, despite the dark morbidity of many of his themes, the dominant mood seems to be one of humor and gaiety; just as happiness manages to outweigh the gloom in his early poetry. The stories in the volume go in triads, and if one of the sections is unusually grim he is always ready with the light touch in his next cameo. The opening title, "Three Heavy Husbands," covers three stories which explore the problem of inter-personal communication. This idea of communication, which at the moment is absorbing writers like Harold Pinter, runs right through Stephens's stories and finds its most terrible and chilling expression in the story "Desire" in *Etched in Moonlight*, which I shall come back to.

Here the problem is introduced lightly, almost facetiously, and the treatment is delightfully humorous. Perhaps the most amusing is the second piece where a lugubrious, silent bridegroom looks forward fearfully to the problem of keeping up conversation with his wife "down the interminable vistas to his death . . . more and more he became doubtful of his ability to cope with, or his endurance to withstand, the extraordinary debate called marriage." True to his method Stephens builds him up as a type, around the central trait of heavy silence. "With some reservations, he enjoyed listening, but particularly he enjoyed listening to his own thoughts as they trod slowly and very certainly to foregone conclusions." But in this particular case there is no real problem, and the apprehensive husband's difficulty is resolved through his wife's humor and intuition.

However, in the next story, "A Glass of Beer," the idea is given much more serious scrutiny. An aging widower in Paris has looked forward to the day he would be free of his wife. When she eventually dies he is unable to enter into any of the joys that his imagination had held up to him.

His wife had been dead for over a year. He had hungered, he had prayed for her death. He had hated that woman (and for how many
years) with a kind of masked ferocity . . . What unending, slow quarrels they had together! How her voice had droned pitilessly in his ears! She in one room, he in another, and through the open door there rolled that unending recitation of reproaches, an interminable catalogue of nothings, while he sat dumb as a fish, with a mind that smouldered and blazed.

This condition of “quiet desperation” in marriage is obsessional with Stephens and invariably it is associated with a failure to communicate and ultimately a failure to love. The widower’s isolation within a meaningless marriage is intensified and aggravated by his meaningless release, for he is now isolated in a strange city and unable even to buy a newspaper in the unfamiliar language. From the depths of his embittered loneliness he sees with shocking clarity a living vision of a world without love, as the prostitutes parade past him:

Raddled faces with heavy eyes and rough lips. Ragged lips that had been chewed by every mad dog in the world. What lips there were everywhere! Bright scarlet splashes in dead-white faces. Thin red gashes that suggested rat-traps instead of kisses. Bulbous, flabby lips that would wobble and shiver if attention failed them. Lips of horrid fascination that one looked at and hated and ran to . . . looking at him slyly or baldly, they passed along and turned after a while and repassed him, and turned again in promenade.

The side of Stephens’s character evident in this passage is seldom realized by those who regard him merely as a whimsical humorist. But this livid realism instinct with bitterness screams from some of his early poems and the curious, suppressed and largely subconscious misogyny evident above re-emerges savagely in “The Blind Man” in this volume.

The theme of connubial discord, whether it be through isolation or acrimony, is treated overtly in “Three Women Who Wept,” “The Triangle,” “Three Angry People,” “Three Young Wives,” “The Horses,” “Three Lovers Who Lost,” and finally in “The Blind Man,” a story which finds Stephens at his most unrelentingly horrific. It appears in two stories of the Etched in Moonlight volume, “Darling” and “Desire.” It is in “Desire,” one of his finest stories, that it gets its most telling treatment. Birgit Bramsback in a recent article in the Colby Library Quarterly sees a similarity between “Desire” and Joyce’s “The Dead,” and it is very likely that Stephens was influenced by that great story. The point of “Desire,” however, is rather difficult.
to grasp at first, without first understanding the background of preoccupation that I have tried to indicate behind Stephens's stories.

The story treats simply of how a man tells his wife of an experience he had coming home from work. He had saved a stranger from being run down and in the subsequent conversation the stranger had urged him to make a wish, a wish for the thing he most desired. After long consideration the man had chosen to be left alive at his present age until his death. In the night his wife has a dream, a dream that she is on an arctic voyage and that she is lost and abandoned, freezing to death in a desert of ice. She becomes aware of a terrible coldness near her and she wakes up to find her husband dead beside her in the bed. Now to my mind the point of the story does not lie in the slick irony of a man who had his desire fulfilled to the letter. If that were all, the extended symbolism of the arctic voyage would not have been necessary nor indeed would there have been much point in giving his wife such a part to play in it. The point seems to be that the husband made his wish independently, selfishly, without consulting his wife who was rightly part of him. The wife's dream is a realization of her own loneliness and abandonment and the husband's death is his punishment for the spiritual betrayal of his marriage. Seen thus it is an extraordinarily fine story and the snow and ice symbolism is made into an instrument of uncommon eloquence.

The story epitomizes in a most moving and tragic way the whole trend of Stephens's thought on this theme and it stands apart from all his other work in the richness of its symbolic overtones. It shows Stephens having absorbed the lesson of Joyce and creating for himself a new and expressive form and technique wherein symbolism might play a part. But he does not consolidate his gains. The other stories in the book, while showing an increased mastery of technique, are in his former manner. It is significant that when he is not writing on his favorite theme of marital strife and estrangement he still does not abandon his overriding involvement in the crisis of communication. That horrible second story in "Three Women Who Wept" explores the sick anxiety of a woman to come to terms with her brutish idiot son; "The Wolf" is a brilliant portrayal of the effort of a lonely unloved man, an outsider in the human
family, to establish contact with his fellowmen. It contains, incidentally, a hilarious description of him as he comes home from the fair drunk, done in Stephens’s drollest and most eccentric manner. Again in stories like “The Boss” the theme is explored in terms of employer and employee, a situation that has frequently appeared in several of the stories of Here Are Ladies. Whatever the material the same theme is eternally present, the relentless dialogue spoken or unspoken between man and woman or between man and man.

Two important stories in Etched in Moonlight stand apart from the general pattern. There is the title story itself which takes the form of a dream and has a mystic dreamlike quality. It is set in some distant indeterminate time in history and is faintly reminiscent of one of Dunsany’s heroic romances. In fact, it is a morality, a study of guilt and punishment conveyed through a strange and terrible story told in the clearest and most lapidary prose. But it is somehow inconclusive; it is hard for the mind to lay satisfactory hold on its elusive ethereal fabric. Its dreamlike texture defeats its reality. It would provide interesting speculations for a thesis but for all its visionary momentousness I am inclined to dismiss it as one of the interminable experiments that his versatility drove him to — not a failure but not a success either.

The other story, “Hunger,” is considered by many to be his finest. It is an unvarnished tale of a poor Dublin family that withers slowly of starvation because the husband cannot find work or the wife beg relief. The story is told simply and without overt comment — unusual for Stephens who can seldom resist his obiter dicta — but there is a suppressed note of white hot anger just below the surface, that gives it grievous urgency. It is the restraint that gives the writer away, that betrays his fierce concern; a restraint that Stephens seldom imposed on himself but that is most telling when he describes the final horror:

Into this place the gentleman called on the following day to investigate, and was introduced into a room swept almost as free of furniture as a dog’s kennel is; to the staring, wise-eyed child who lived in a chair and to the quiet morsel of death that lay in a cot by the wall.

For my part I find that brief description more harrowing than the most morbid of his grotesqueries, more harrowing than most things I have read. The story, written in 1918, five years after
the great strike, is his only substantial cry of protest on behalf of Dublin's poor but it is a protest more powerful than a lifetime of manifestos. Of it Stephens himself remarked: "The story is a true one and would have killed me but that I got it out of my system that way." It was only under the strongest compulsion in later life that he let his mind dwell on the naked horrors of his childhood environment and he needed similar compulsion to engage in the literature of protest, national or social.

Only one aspect of his short fiction remains and that is his treatment of childhood. Only five pieces out of the two volumes touch on childhood themes and three of these, "Three Happy Places," are not really stories but evocative essays recalling childhood scenes and atmospheres. In the cameo from "Three Angry People" with its reference to "the Paps of Dana" we have a prose telling of one of Seamus Beg's encounters on the Rocky Road to Dublin. The child acts merely as listener and impish interrogator. But the remaining story from "Three Lovers Who Lost" is a superb recreation of a childhood fantasy comparable to Salinger's "The Laughing Man" or Saki's many evocations of the enchanted world of childhood. Starting off with the young lad listening to his mother reading a tale about the Beautiful Princess, Stephens by a miraculous feat of projection goes on to paint the child's adventures that are one part reality and three parts the energy of his fired imagination. This is the mood and memory that Stephens treats with most affection and wistfulness, "the sunny summertime of dreams! The dragons I had nervèd my hand to kill. The maid I could have rescued and the queen whose champion long ago I might have been." There is such a spectacular contrast between the sun-drenched world of innocence evoked in such lines as this and the visions of malice glimpsed above that one inclines towards the view that the writer was at least mildly schizophrenic, though there is no external evidence to support this view.

His only other story of childhood is perhaps the best known of his stories, "A Rhinoceros, Some Ladies, and a Horse," but I have always found it rather pointless. It was gratifying to learn recently that it was not meant as a short story in the first
place but as the first chapter of an autobiography. (True to
form the anthologists nearly always choose it to represent his
work.) It is, however, strange that Stephens, who was so drawn
to children both in his novels and poetry and who had done
such splendid things with childhood themes, should have neg­
lected them so conspicuously in his stories. It is a pity really,
for he was one of the very few writers of all time — and they
are remarkably few — who could portray children with ab­
solute authenticity.

It is difficult to assess a writer’s influence on his successors
and normally it is foolish to try. From purely intrinsic merits
Stephens did not deserve to exert an extraordinary influence;
his best work appeared too late — in 1928 — when the modern
movement was well under way. Yet, he came on the scene at a
critical time in 1913. It is important to remember that at this
time Stephens had a much bigger reputation than either Joyce
or Corkery. The previous year he had published The Char­
woman’s Daughter and The Crock of Gold. English reviewers
were comparing him favorably with Hardy and Arnold Bennett.
It is therefore possible that he exerted an influence which, look­
ing back in the light of subsequent events, we might now be in­
clined to underrate. To my mind the note of lyricism that one
finds in O’Connor, O’Faolain, and even more conspicuously in
the early stories of Mary Lavin, and in all the stories of Bryan
McMahon, a quality that distinguishes the Irish school from
almost every other contemporary movement, may have first
been triggered and made accessible by Stephens’s example.

In her approach to character Mary Lavin in many of her
early stories seems to aim at a similar effect to Stephens. In
stories such as “The Black Grove” and “The Green Grave” or
“The Widow’s Son,” where the protagonists are briefly sketched
and identified by primary traits, her concept of characterization
is, like Stephens’s, stark and typical. In fact, it is interesting to
trace Miss Lavin’s subsequent movement away from this method
of characterization as she develops and shifts her forms to the
more individualist and subtle intricacies of human behavior.

It is, as I have said, impossible to make a definite assessment
of Stephens’s influence on subsequent writers. Taken all in all,
however, it would not be unreasonable to claim for him some
place among those talents who helped strongly to shape the
modern Irish short story.