March 1961

James Stephens: Dublin-Paris-Return

Birgit Bramsback

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 5, no.9, March 1961, p.215-224

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mjkelly@colby.edu.
Howe'er posterity shall view these deeds JAMES STEPHENS will always have a place among the Muses' chief priests. In his presentation of the immensities — Eternity, Space, Force — in his picture of the Lord walking in the deserted garden, in his account of what Thomas said in a pub about the anger of the Almighty "he passes beyond what is simply human and becomes a voice for the Spirit of Poetry;" musas ipsas audire videaris, of prose writers too, as everybody knows, he is in the first rank. It is scarcely necessary to cite The Demigods, The Char­woman's Daughter and the most widely known perhaps of all his works, The Crock of Gold. To one so eminent the most enthusiastic applause is due.

Thus was the most lyrical poet writing in English summoned to supper with the gods.

JAMES STEPHENS: DUBLIN — PARIS — RETURN

By Birgit Bramsbäck

The literary career of James Stephens falls into four periods: 1. His first Dublin period until May 1913; 2. His Paris period from May 1913 until August 1915 (with the exception of the months of August, September and October 1914 which were spent in Dublin); 3. His second Dublin period from August 1915 until January 1925; 4. His London, or “emigration,” period which came to an end with his death on December 26, 1950. This last period was one of increasing personal tragedy and declining creative power; it was, however, interspersed with exciting lecture tours to the United States, frequent visits to Paris, an evacuation period in the Cotswolds during the Second World War, and a few visits to Dublin, his native town. It seems that it was not merely personal reasons that urged Stephens to give up his post in the National Gallery of Ireland and finally settle in London after his return from one of his lecture tours to the United States in 1925. Ireland during and after the Civil War was a country marked by scars and bitter hatreds and, to Stephens, London society must have been not only a wonderful escape but also an irresistible lure.
It has not been generally known that Stephens wrote a good deal of his poetry and some of his prose in Paris. Like James Joyce he drew inspiration from his Irish background even though far from his native land. The majority of the poems included in *Songs from the Clay* (1915) and *The Adventures of Seumas Beg/The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1915) first saw the light of day in Paris; there is, however, nothing Parisian about them, neither in theme nor in atmosphere. It is in his prose that one has to look for a possible French influence, if any. Several of the stories included in *Here Are Ladies* (1913) were written during his first six months in Paris and first printed in the London Nation. This collection of short stories may be looked upon as a kind of transition volume between his first Dublin period and his time in Paris. During his first few months there he also wrote a three-act play which was never printed. Without supplying its title he mentions it in his letters to Thomas Bodkin. In one he refers to the play as “A Strindbergian cleverality & nothing more — Certainly it is not & will never be marketable. The subject is unpleasant & the treatment is no more than so.”

During his Paris years Stephens also wrote the novel *The Demi-Gods*, and a series of nine or ten articles entitled “Paris 1915” intended for, but not accepted by, the Century Magazine. Towards the end of 1914 very tepid reviews of *The Demi-Gods* were beginning to appear, and Stephens poured out his heart to Bodkin: “My publishers have been sending me press notices of The Demi-Gods. They are not enthusiastic, but, with yourself, I believe in that book. The tepidity of those reviews sent me to re-read the book & it is, I'll swear a good one & almost worthy of having your name in its preface page. One gets terrified about dedications,” he adds. “Whenever I think

---

1 The publication of *Here Are Ladies* was delayed several months on account of this. The titles of some of the stories first printed in the London Nation are: “A Heavy Husband,” “The Young Man out of a Book,” “Not at Home,” “The Stone-Man,” “The Morning Road,” “By Fire-Light,” “Un Bock Brun,” “The Horses,” “The Triangle,” “Going to Work,” and “The Blind Man.”

2 I take pleasure in thanking Dr. Thomas Bodkin for having placed at my disposal his important and valuable James Stephens collection of letters, manuscripts, and proofs. A good deal of the material for this article is drawn from Dr. Bodkin’s collection.

3 The letter is dated 11 rue Campagne-Premiere, Paris, Oct. 29th, 1913. The play in question could be neither the unpublished one entitled *The Demi-Gods A Play in 3 Acts*, a manuscript of which is preserved in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, nor The Wooing of Julia Elizabeth which had been staged in Dublin in 1911.
of poor Stephen MacKenna I blush to think that I saddled my friend with that idiotic Lonely God. There are folk who laud that poem to my teeth.”

It may seem surprising that Stephens should have thought so highly of *The Demi-Gods*, but it is hardly to be wondered at that this fantastic novel about tramps and angels has never become very popular.

In Dr. Bodkin's collection of letters from Stephens it is possible to study fairly closely the various stages of particularly the two collections of verse *Songs from the Clay* and *The Adventures of Seumas Beg*. Stephens sent manuscripts and proofs to Thomas Bodkin and George Russell, who were his two closest friends at the time. In one letter we are told that he had just sent the ms. of *Songs* to AE, who severely criticized this first draft of the poems: “I am afraid that as regards the verses which I sent to AE, he was quite right in thumping me well. He did thump me, by the way, four pages of solid whacks was what he wrote me on these miserable poems. Since then I have transfigured them. I had a regular fury of verse & the book is no longer anything like what he saw. I do not think he would dislike it now & I think you also will be pleased at least with parts of it. The fault as AE pointed out was a lack of variety but thats not its fault now.” AE's criticism bore fruit, but the publication of the collection was delayed for over a year. Not until March 1915 did the collection actually appear.

*Songs from the Clay* contains several of the best poems of Stephens, and very few uninteresting ones. The distance from his native country may have given them an intensity which might otherwise have been lacking. “The Goat Paths,” for instance, is a pastoral poem describing a place of the same name in the Wicklow mountains south of Dublin, with crooked paths winding here and there through the heather and the furze, goats strolling about in the “quiet sunniness.” Anyone familiar with the Irish countryside will immediately recognize this typical scene.

A feature particularly noticeable in *Songs from the Clay* is Stephens' love of colors. He has a color scheme characteristic

---

5 Letter written to Thomas Bodkin from Stephens' Paris address on February 22, 1914.
of the dramatic Irish landscape, nearly always changing, with blue and purple lights, green or brown fields, golden or white sun, grey or pearly-colored clouds, silvery moon, dim reds. In "Blue Stars and Gold" the poet is standing in a street between a car and a tram, peering up towards the sky: "So starry-sown that you could not,/With any care have stuck a pin/Through any single vacant spot." Or "The Holy Time," the last poem in the collection, with its slow, drawn-out rhythm:

The drowsy sun trod slowly to his rest;
He gathered all his dusty gold again
Away with him.
He only left a dim
Red colour on the sky, a ruddy stain
Scarce to be seen upon the quiet west:
So evening came, and darkness, and the sound
Of moving feet upon the whispering ground.

In Songs from the Clay Stephens turned from his picture gallery of poor, mad, queer old people, so familiar to us from his early prose works and his first two collections of poetry, Insurrections and The Hill of Vision. There are occasional glimpses of them also in Songs, but above all these poems stress the note of nature. The poet everywhere sees the hand of nature, and many a time he even seems to be one with the sea, the wind, the birds, the bees, the little things, the night, the noises, and the shades creeping about in the dark, the chatter in the woods, supernatural or half-supernatural beings, such as satyrs, leprechauns, elves, or voices, with which he peoples nature.

In March 1915 Bodkin received the first poem intended for inclusion in The Adventures of Seumas Beg, a little lyric called "The Cherry Tree." Stephens seemed to fear that his poetry days were finished, but in July that year he had nearly completed the first part of the new volume and was preparing the second part, The Rocky Road to Dublin. He wrote to Bodkin: "With 'The Adventures of Seumas Beg' I am also issuing a collection of Dublin Sketches under the title of 'The Rocky Road to Dublin'. My memory fails me a little far from my native land. I have remembered, for instance, that one walks in Grafton Street at four o'clock & have harvested that fact. I have remembered that flowerpots and patriotic verse fell from the windows
of York Street, that one sees the moon well from Rathmines Bridge, that at Dumphies Corner you can get funerally tipsy & that King Billy rides in College Green & Larkin rides in Beresford Place. If you can recollect any small street facts & refresh my memories with your recollects I'll be your servant.”

In *The Adventures of Seumas Beg* Stephens again introduced his picture gallery of queer people, but in these poems they are presented from a child’s point of view. The first part of the book deals, as the title suggests, with the adventures, fancies, and thoughts of a little boy, of course Stephens himself as a child: Seumas Beg awakened by the sun, hearing voices in the dark, peeping at the moon sailing by his window at night, tumbling upon a giant in an orchard, meeting with the devil walking down the lane with a soul in his bag, or being fright­ened by an old man with a knife who is just beating up a young girl.

The second part, *The Rocky Road to Dublin*, presents pic­tures, glimpses and reminiscences of Dublin and its surround­ings. The majority of the poems bear titles of Dublin streets and places, such as College Green, Mount Street, Westland Row, The Canal Bank, Beresford Place, O’Connell Bridge, George's Street, etc. Streets or places are not described, but characteristic features of people or things connected with them are given; as for instance, lord and ladies walking between the Green and Trinity to have tea and cakes in a café in Grafton Street, or the gossamer of the moon and the silver of the stars spreading over the canal and the poplars at Portobello Bridge.

One can easily imagine Stephens writing these poems in Paris while dreaming of Ireland in some café, or pacing about the Paris boulevards leaning on his Irish blackthorn stick, which Bodkin had sent him. On receiving it he wrote: ‘‘What a stick! It’s surely the champion of the world. It’s the ideal & I have marched beside it today like a sapling strolling by an oak, I being the sapling. The Boulevard St. Michel admired me discreetly but passionately. Three jeunes gens came along swing­ing canes which were jewelled all down the front, but when they saw my stick they hid their canes and were abashed. I

---

*Letter written from Stephens' Paris address on July 16, 1915. This letter was the last but one which Stephens sent to Bodkin from Paris. The last letter is postmarked London, July 28, 1915.*
honestly can't tell you how pleased I am at your present, for I take it as a present, & it engraved & all in massy silver & with a ferrule on it would split a hill if it hit it. Myself & I have sworn brotherhood, it snuggles into my hand as if that was its home planned by the gods. . . . The douane man tried to pull its head off to see was there a sword inside it & he told me it was un tres dur canne begor."

Stephens wanted, and really tried, to learn French. He reported his progress or non-progress regularly in his letters. In May 1913 he wrote to Bodkin: "Meanwhile I have noted your programme of lectures as a way of learning French. It is admirable but just now I am told the lectures are all over. . . . There are sermons however & these I will listen to." In June 1913: "I am starting seriously now in a study of French & by the time you arrive mai foi [sic]!" In July: "I go to school every morning at 8.30 for an hour 'with shining morning face'. I renew my youth. But my french is as coy as your gaelic." In December 1913 he stated that his French was hastening slowly, but at the end of February 1914 he had made some progress: "By the way the french language is beginning to capitulate to me. Not in speech, for I never talk to anyone but I read now with some ease & every week sees me better at that art. Anatole France is almost as easy reading as English." It is hard to know how seriously to take such a statement, but on February 29, 1915 he wrote Bodkin that he had read seven or eight of Balzac's books, not, however, for the mere pleasure of reading them, but in order to study Balzac's style and technique, "his method of dealing with large masses of people and events." In so doing Stephens conceived the heroic idea of writing Le [sic] Comédie Humaine of Ireland: "What a story there is to tell there. Ireland is & has been, but 'is' for me who am modern & interested almost entirely in the things that I touch and feel. My plan is to take a slice of Irish time, say the twenty years culminating in this day & the tomorrow during which I will be writing and explore these, with the particularity of a grub working through an apple, until I have attained to a con-
sciousness of Ireland in all its dimensions, and which con­sciousness I can impress, not alone into my books, but into our people — Behold a job!” He expanded on this idea, but was seized with doubts that he would ever be able to carry through such an heroic plan: “I am a chasm of ignorance and radiating from me are subterranean caves filled equally with ignorance.” It would seem that some of the short stories and studies written under his pen name “James Esse” were the outcome of this plan, never carried out, of writing La Comédie Humaine of Ireland.

Paris inspired Stephens — to write about Ireland. He liked Paris more and more, even though at first he was rather skep­tical. In one of his first Paris letters to Thomas Bodkin he gave a description of his impressions of life in the French metrop­olis: “These concierges are strange people (I mean the system is strange, but I have quite forgotten how to write). Meanwhile the beauty of this city grows more on me mixed with a certain gentle melancholy for Dublin. You know Dublin really has points, certain pleasant incompetencies. The first shattering blow my preconceptions received was that of the polite french people. They are a mighty careful businesslike, adequate people & they do not waste any more time in being polite than we do. No one has yet been rude to me or anything like that — but somehow one had a tradition. It’s shattered I’m glad to say — a race of polite people would be utterly horrible. . . . Language deserts me utterly when face to face with the abo­riginals but my resolve holds good that when I return to Ireland I will riot among your French books. . . . The only thing that makes these French women and men really noteworthy is their attitude of independence & self respect. I wonder is it sexual freedom which has made the women so self-possessed.”

It was just before the outbreak of the First World War that Stephens decided to return to Dublin for a few months, and before leaving Paris he wrote to Bodkin: “I see horrid things in today’s Daily Mail. There is great rumour of war here and la foule chanted the Marseillaise on the boulevards last night.” Back in Paris again on November 3rd he stated: “heres a line

9 Letter dated c/o Spicer-Simson, Esq. 3 rue Campagne-Première, Paris 21st May 1913. This was written before Stephens obtained a flat of his own at No. 11 in the same street.
just to say that we have arrived after a weary enough journey. Belgian refugees & French traveling with us in the boat & the word passport coming from every direction.” In December 1914 he gave a description of wartime Paris, and the following extract from the letter is a good example of his peculiar mixture of “broken” English and faulty French: “Dublin is dull you say. It cannot be half as dull as Paris. It is true that folk are beginning to get back here, but in every rue there are houses after houses fermé a cause de guerre, maisons sequestré & maisons gone bang for lack of trade. These streets that used to be so murderous are not so any longer. Children may play in the middle of the Avenue de l’Opera. I used to cross that street with my heart in my mouth and my eyes skewways. The Luxembourg Jardin would make you weep. The Cafés are like tombs. Besides that the newspapers are censored with a rigour far beyond that in Ireland. The cinemas even are censored. There are no war pictures shown here. The voice of the American lady which rang of yore from every grove is heard no more in the land and chez nous we have the whooping cough on which a malison.”

Paris grew on Stephens. He retained his flat there even after finally settling in London. One of his favorite haunts was the Café Lilas on the crest of Montparnasse, where he found peace for work. Sometimes he and his family barely managed to survive while waiting for royalties on his books to arrive. Stephens was, however, used to enduring hardships. In the end he felt much at home in Paris, and in one of his last Paris letters to Bodkin he wrote that his last year there had made him singularly detached as regards Ireland, a statement the sincerity of which one might be forgiven for doubting, for Stephens jumped with delight to a suggestion made to him by Bodkin in June 1915 to apply for a Registrarship in the National Gallery of Ireland. As the news of this post reached him he felt that he was “flooded over and drowned by the war;” that nobody was interested in buying or reading his books: “the months of this year still to come loom before this deponent with a bleak gaunt & hungry appearance.” Destitution stared him in the face. Only a month later, however, his prospects had brightened consider-

12 The envelope of this letter is postmarked 16 Juin 15 Paris.
ably, for then he received some advance royalties on *Seumas Beg*. Thanks to this ease in his pecuniary situation he was tempted to withdraw his application for the Registrarship when informed that one of the Governors fiercely opposed his candidacy. The difficulties were overcome, however, and in September 1915 he was appointed Registrar of the National Gallery.

During his time as Registrar, that is his second Dublin period, Stephens devoted himself to patriotic themes and material based on Irish poetry and Irish sagas. The two main collections of poetry dating from this time are *Green Branches*, inspired by the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, and *Reincarnations*, a series of recreations or readaptations of poems written by Irish poets in Irish. The collection *A Poetry Recital* dedicated to Stephen MacKenna, one of Stephens’ closest friends, also appeared during this time, but most of the poems had been printed before. To this period belong also his two most important works as a political writer, the remarkable contemporary document *The Insurrection in Dublin*, a kind of diary in which he described, day by day, his own impressions of the Easter Week Rising, and *Arthur Griffith, Journalist and Statesman*, two essays on Arthur Griffith. Three more important prose works came towards the end of this period, *Irish Fairy Tales* (1920), *Deirdre* (1923), and *In the Land of Youth* (1924), all based on Irish saga material. The last is hardly a success, whereas it may be said that his novel *Deirdre* is a refreshing and sparkling version of this vital old tale, and some of the stories in *Irish Fairy Tales* actually surpass the originals.

What is not known is the fact that the majority of the stories contained in *Etched in Moonlight* were written during the years 1916-1918, although the book was printed as late as 1928. Stephens’ short story talent is brought to perfection in these seven stories. Here, as also previously in *Here Are Ladies*, Stephens probes deep into the human mind; his is the special gift of compressing a whole life or a significant phase of a person’s life into a few pages.

There is a remarkable similarity between the symbolism of, for instance, “Desire” and the symbolic end of James Joyce’s “The Dead.” In Joyce’s story snow and a snowy landscape symbolize death, and Stephens has made an icy seascape fore-
shadow and symbolize death: the ship sailing to the North Pole is the Vehicle of Death, and the captain of the ship is Death himself. Stephens here makes use of traditional motifs for the purpose of creating a psychological study. These stories are no doubt an attempt at something quite distinct from what actually came to absorb his mind — Irish saga material. It may to my mind be regretted that he did not write more short stories of the same kind as the ones in *Etched in Moonlight*, the most poignant of which is "Hunger," a starvation story, the tragedy of which is intensified by the lucid, objective style.

Unfortunately the scope of this article does not allow a treatment of the rest of Stephens' work, which I hope to discuss in another essay. I have here dealt with some aspects of the two middle periods of his career, and tried to give significant glimpses of his life in Paris, and his subsequent years in Dublin. In 1915 he left wartime Paris to return to a revolutionary Dublin, and in 1925 he left an Ireland suffering from the after-effects of the Civil War. But, whether living in or away from Ireland, it was always his own country that inspired him, and it is as an interpreter of his own native land that Stephens will always capture the reader — apart from the fact that *The Crock of Gold*, which established the writer’s fame, is an immortal book.

JAMES STEPHENS AT COLBY COLLEGE

*By Richard Cary*

The following accumulation of materials by and about James Stephens in the library at Colby College is predominantly a part of the James A. Healy Collection of modern Irish literature. Some of the items, notably those in American periodicals, are to be found in the general stacks.

The objective of selection here is to lead researchers to significant materials — no brief "mentions" in books, essays or newspapers are included; no mere reprints in newspapers and magazines of poems or stories previously published, unless the