Well Moused, Lion

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It is not too much to say that some writers are entirely without imagination—without that associative kind of imagination certainly, of which the final tests are said to be simplicity, harmony, and truth. In Mr. Stevens’ work, however, imagination precludes banality and order prevails. In his book, he calls imagination “the will of things,” “the magnificent cause of being,” and demonstrates how imagination may evade “the world without imagination”; effecting an escape which, in certain manifestations of bravura, is uneasy rather than bold. One feels, however, an achieved remoteness as in Tu Muh’s lyric criticism: “Powerful is the painting ... and high is it hung on the spotless wall in the lofty hall of your mansion.” There is the love of magnificence and the effect of it in these sharp, solemn, rhapsodic elegant pieces of eloquence; one asents to the view taken by the author, of Crispin whose mind was free

And more than free, elate, intent, profound.

The riot of gorgeousness in which Mr. Stevens’ imagination takes refuge, recalls Balzac’s reputed attitude to money, to which he was indifferent unless he could have it “in heaps or by the ton.” It is “a flourishing tropic he requires”; so wakeful is he in his appetite for color and in perceiving what is needed to meet the requirements of a new tone key, that Oscar Wilde, Frank Alva Parsons, Tappé, and John Murray Anderson seem children asleep in comparison with him. One is met in these poems by some such clash of pigment as where in a showman’s display of orchids or gladiolas, one receives the effect of

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

vials of picocarmin, magenta, gamboge, and violet mingled each at the highest point of intensity:

In Yucatan, the Maya sonneteers
Of the Caribbean amphitheatre
In spite of hawk and falcon, green toucan
And jay, still to the night-bird made their plea,
As if raspberry tanagers in palms,
High up in orange air, were barbarous.

One is excited by the sense of proximity to Java peacocks, golden pheasants, South American macaw feather capes, Chilcat blankets, hair seal needlework, Singalese masks, and Rousseau's paintings of banana leaves and alligators. We have the hydrangeas and dogwood, the "blue, gold, pink, and green" of the temperate zone, the hibiscus, "red as red" of the tropics,

... moonlight on the thick cadaverous bloom
That yuccas breed ...

... with serpent-kin encoiled
Among the purple tufts, the scarlet crowns,
and as in a shot spun fabric, the infinitude of variation of the colors of the ocean:

... the blue
And the colored purple of the lazy sea,

the emerald, indigos, and mauves of disturbed water, the azure and basalt of lakes; we have Venus "the centre of sea-green pomp" and America "polar purple." Mr. Stevens' exact demand, moreover, projects itself from nature to human nature. It is the eye of no "maidenly greenhorn" which has differentiated Crispin's daughters; which characterizes the "ordinary women" as "gaunt guitarists" and issues the junior-to-senior mandate in "Floral Decorations for Bananas":

Pile the bananas on planks.
The women will all be shanks
And bangles and slated eyes.

He is a student of "the flamebeaued manner,"

... not indifferent to smart detail ... 

... hang of coat, degree
Of buttons ...

One resents the temper of certain of these poems. Mr. Stevens is never inadvertently crude; one is conscious, however, of a deliberate bearishness—a shadow of acrimonious, unprovoked contumely. Despite the sweet-Clementine-will-you-be-mine nonchalance of the "Apos-
trophe to Vincentine," one feels oneself to be in danger of unearthing the ogre and in "Last Looks at the Lilacs," a pride in unserviceableness is suggested which makes it a microcosm of cannibalism.

Occasionally the possession of one good is remedy for not possessing another as when Mr. Stevens speaks of "the young emerald, evening star," "tranquilizing ... thetorments of confusion." "Sunday Morning" on the other hand—a poem so suggestive of a masterly equipoise—gives ultimately the effect of the mind disturbed by the intangible; of a mind oppressed by the properties of the world which it is expert in manipulating. And proportionately, aware as one is of the author's susceptibility to the fever of actuality, one notes the accurate gusto with which he discovers the negro, that veritable "medicine of cherries" to the badgered analyst. In their resilience and certitude, the "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" and the commemorating of a negress who

Took seven white dogs
To ride in a cab,

are proud harmonies.

One's humor is based upon the most serious part of one's nature.
"Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"; "A Nice Shady Home"; and "Daughters with Curles": the capacity for self-mockery in these titles illustrates the author's disgust with mere vocativeness.

Instinct for words is well determined by the nature of the liberties taken with them, some writers giving the effect merely of presumptuous egotism—an unavoided outlandishness; others, not: Shakespeare arresting one continually with nutritious permutations as when he apostrophises the lion in A Midsummer Night's Dream—"Well moused, lion." Mr. Stevens' "junipers shagged with ice," is properly courageous as are certain of his adjectives which have the force of verbs: "the spick torrent," "tidal skies," "loquacious columns"; there is the immunity to fear, of the good artist, in "the blather that the water made." His precise diction and verve are grateful as contrasts to the current vulgarizations of "gesture," "dimensions" and "intrigue." He is able not only to express an idea with mere perspicuity; he is able to do it by implication as in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" in which the glass coach evolved from icicles; the shadow, from birds; it becomes a kind of aristocratic cipher. "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," moreover, despite its not especially original theme of poverty enriched by death, is a triumph of explicit ambiguity. He gets a special effect with those adjectives which often weaken as in the lines:
... That all beasts should...
... be beautiful

As large, ferocious tigers are,
and in the phrase, “the eye of the young alligator,” the adjective as it is
perhaps superfluous to point out, makes for activity. There is a certain
bellicose sensitiveness in

I do not know which to prefer...
The blackbird whistling
Or just after,

and in the characterization of the snow man who

... nothing himself, beholds
The nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

In its nimbleness con brio with seriousness, moreover, “Nomad
Exquisite” is a piece of that ferocity for which one values Mr. Stevens
most:

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth
The big-finned palm
And green vine angering for life.

Poetic virtuosities are allied—especially those of diction, imagery,
and cadence. In no writer’s work are metaphors less “winter starved.”

In “Architecture” Mr. Stevens asks:

How shall we hew the sun, . . .
How carve the violet moon
To set in nicks?

Pierce, too, with buttresses of coral air
And purple timbers,
Various argentines,

and “The Comedian as the Letter C,” as the account of the craftsman’s
“simple jaunt,” is an expanded metaphor which becomes as one con-
teplates it, hypnotically incandescent like the rose-tinged fringe of the
night-blooming cereus. One applauds those analogies derived from
an enthusiasm for the sea:

She scuds the glitters,
Noiselessly, like one more wave.

The salt hung on his spirit like a frost,
The dead brine melted in him like a dew.

In his positiveness, aplomb, and verbal security, he has the mind and
the method of China; in such controversial effects as:

Of what was it I was thinking?
So the meaning escapes,

and certainly in dogged craftsmanship. Infinitely conscious in his pro-
cesses, he says

Speak even as if I did not hear you speaking
But spoke for you perfectly in my thoughts.

One is not subject in reading him, to the disillusionment experienced in
reading novices and charlatans who achieve flashes of beauty and
immediately contradict the pleasure afforded by offending in precisely
those respects in which they have pleased—showing that they are defi-
cient in conscious artistry.

Imagination implies energy and imagination of the finest type
involves an energy which results in order “as the motion of a snake’s
body goes through all parts at once, and its violation acts at the same
instant in coils that go contrary ways.” There is the sense of the
architectural diagram in the disjoined titles of poems with related
themes. Refraining for fear of impairing its littleness of contour, from
overelaborating felicities inherent in a subject, Mr. Stevens uses only
such elements as the theme demands; for example, his delineation of
the peacock in “Domination of Black,” is austere, and splendor
being achieved cumulatively in “Bantams in Pine-Woods,” “The Load of
Sugar-Cane,” “The Palace of the Babies,” and “The Bird with the
Coppery, Keen Claws.”

That “there have been many most excellent poets that never versi-
ﬁed, and now swarm many versifiers that never need answer to the
name of poets,” needs no demonstration. The following lines as poetry
independent of rhyme, beg the question as to whether rhyme is indis-
pensably contributory to poetic enjoyment:

There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing.
Like the clashed edges of two words that kill

and

The clambering wings of black revolved,
Making harsh torment of the solitude.

It is of course evident that subsidiary to beauty of thought, rhyme is
powerful in so far as it never appears to be invented for its own sake.
In this matter of apparent naturalness, Mr. Stevens is faultless—as in
correctness of assonance:

Chieftain Ifucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!
The better the artist, moreover, the more determined he will be to set down words in such a way as to admit of no interpretation of the accent but the one intended, his ultimate power appearing in a self-sufficing, willowy, firmly contrived cadence such as we have in “Peter Quince at the Clavier” and in “Cortège for Rosenbloom”:

... That tread
The wooden ascents
Of the ascending of the dead.

One has the effect of poised uninterrupted harmony, a simple appearing, complicated phase of symmetry of movements as in figure skating, tight-rope dancing, in the kaleidoscopically centrifugal circular motion of certain mediaeval dances. It recalls the snake in Far Away and Long Ago, "moving like quick-silver in a rope-like stream" or the conflict at sea when after a storm, the wind shifts and waves are formed counter to those still running. These expertnesses of concept with their nicely luted edges and effect of flowing continuity of motion, are indeed

... pomp
Of speech which are like music so profound
They seem an exaltation without sound.

One further notes accomplishment in the use of reiteration—that pitfall of half-poets:

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops....
When the wind stops.

In brilliance gained by accelerated tempo in accordance with a fixed melodic design, the precise patterns of many of these poems are interesting.

It was snowing
And it was going to snow,
and the parallelism in “Domination of Black” suggest the Hebrew idea of something added although there is, one admits, more the suggestion of mannerism than in Hebrew poetry. Tea takes precedence of other experiments with which one is familiar, in emotional shorthand of this unwesterly type, and in “Earthy Anecdote” and in the “Invective against Swans,” symmetry of design is brought to a high degree of perfection.

It is rude perhaps, after attributing conscious artistry and a severely intentional method of procedure to an artist, to cite work that he has been careful to omit from his collected work. One regrets, however, the omission by Mr. Stevens of “The Indigo Glass in the Grass,” “The

Man Whose Pharynx was Bad,” “La Mort du Soldat est Près des Choses Naturelles (5 Mars)” and “Comme Dieu Dispense de Graces”:

Here I keep thinking of the primitives—
The sensitive and conscientious themes
Of mountain pallors ebbing into air.

However, in this collection one has eloquence. “The author’s violence is for aggrandizement and not for stupor”; one consents therefore, to the suggestion that when the book of moonlight is written, we leave room for Crispin. In the event of moonlight and a veil to be made gory, he would, one feels, be appropriate in this legitimately sensational act of a ferocious jungle animal.

1) Tu Muh: T’ang period Chinese poet whose work Marianne Moore had seen at the Metropolitan Museum in an exhibition of Chinese paintings, 7 April 1923. See her notebook, Rosenbach 1250/3/5–6.

2) Frank Almah Parsons: President of the New York School of Fine and Applied Art. Parsons School of Design is named after him. Herman Patrick Tappe: New York couturier whose designs were popular in the Twenties. John Murray Anderson: theatrical and motion picture director who in 1930 directed the first all color musical film, The King of Jazz.

3) William Henry Hudson, Far Away and Long Ago (1918), the nature writer’s autobiography of his youth in Argentina.