

ANALYSIS

“Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (1923)

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

“A work produced a few years later than ‘Sunday Morning,’ endeavors to treat the subject of love in hedonistic terms and confesses ironically to encountering more than one difficulty. The poem is often obscure, and, perhaps because one cannot easily follow it, appears far less a unit than ‘Sunday Morning’; it contains extraordinary writing, however.... The first four lines are incomprehensible, except as description, and the claim of the fifth line is unjustified; the remainder of the stanza, however, displays a combination of bitterness, irony, and imperturbable elegance not unworthy of Ben Jonson.”

Yvor Winters

In Defense of Reason

(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 457

“In ‘Le Monocle de Mon Oncle’ the style is more intricate and Stevens’ hedonism tempered by a more thoughtful examination of the meaning of life. The images of the poem constantly contrast sensual experience, (the red bird, the apple, the skull, the pool of pink, and the lilacs) with thought and contemplation (the Chinese philosophers, the poet himself as a ‘rose rabbi’). The poem, however, does not treat of human nature in the wider sense as much as it does the nature of the poetic personality. Stanzas VI-X trace the evolution of the poetic temperament through youth and maturity to old age. In the final stanza (XII) the poet confesses to some difficulty in comprehending love; he now sees nuances where all seemed simple in his youth. The reference to ‘fluttering things’ in the last line also suggests an interest in the realm of idea and spirit as opposed to the world of the flesh. Thus this poem comprises a statement of Stevens’ more mature poetic and philosophic principles which may be contrasted with the ideas of his earlier work.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature

(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 523-24

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