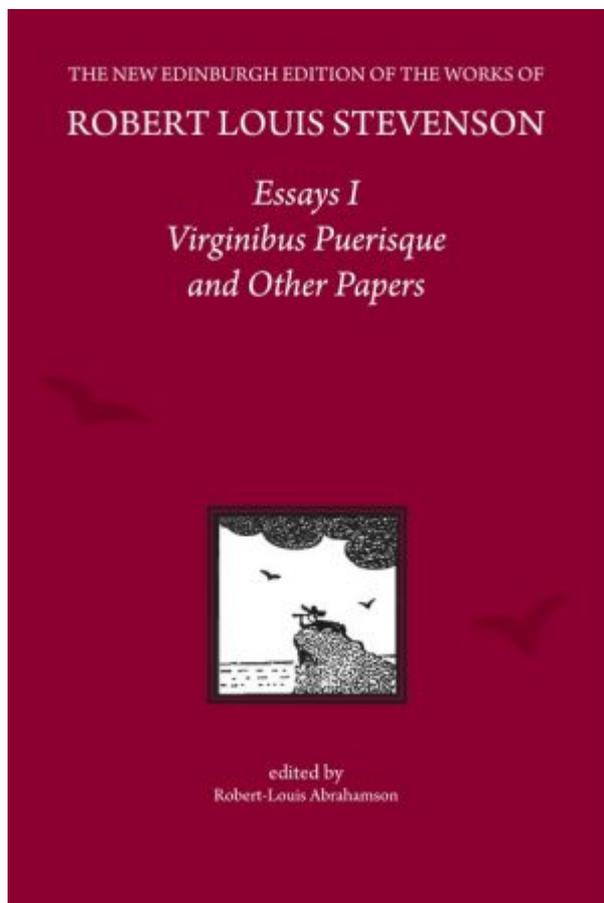


'Essays I: *Virginibus Puerisque* and Other Papers' by Robert Louis Stevenson; edited by Robert-Louis Abrahamson

Review by Alan Sandison



The reaction to the appearance of this volume of the New Edinburgh Edition of the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson has, first and foremost, got to be one of gratitude. As the finer distillation of humane sentiment is remorselessly adulterated with every day that passes, we are given another opportunity to listen to the voice which once gave it such eloquent expression; and if we are to take this volume as a fair example of the promise the new edition holds for us, we (and Stevenson) shall be very well served.

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What the editors cannot escape is an engagement with the definition of the essay - particularly when the exponent can be respectful of the conventions at one

moment and at another apparently quite cavalier. The editors are, of course, well aware of just how Protean this writer can be. Yet, though his readiness to exploit different anatomies for the essay-form might have resulted in a random miscellaneity, it doesn't: to define the nature of the disentropic glue which gives order to his literary world is therefore to define the character of Stevenson the essayist.

So he can refer to these works sometimes as 'Familiar' essays, sometimes as 'Studies' and sometimes even as 'Gossips'; and include within these categories further sub-sets. Thus they can sometimes appear in letters as does 'Night outside the Wick Mail' in a letter to his cousin Bob, or as 'essayistic passage'" as in some of his early letters to Fanny Sitwell. 'The lack of clear literary status for the essays', write the present editors, 'is reflected in the arrangement of the Edinburgh Edition proposed by Colvin and accepted by Stevenson: the essays were placed in a series of volumes entitled Miscellanies'.¹

Confronted by such a various essayistic universe, the editors sensibly invoke Montaigne (a seminal influence on Stevenson) on whose model 'a collection of essays can be quite varied and built up by accretion'.² Hybridity of the sort they encounter allows for some pragmatic interpretation of the rules, a necessity which they turn to advantage so that while their discussion of the essay and of Stevenson as essayist is appropriately discriminating, it is also not too prescriptive, allowing room for Stevenson's own mutable, iridescent literary persona. Stevenson well knew that he was breaching certain formal boundaries, that his inclination 'to enter into dialogue with readers "and wander [...] into a little piece of controversy"', was, as the editors say, not consistent with the typical essay. It was, however, consistent with his ethical and aesthetic principles which emerge from a world-view the editors rightly associate with Montaigne's scepticism and relativism.

Reviewing *Virginibus Puerisque* in 'The Academy' in 1892, Richard Le Gallienne, himself a poet and essayist and a perceptive commentator on Stevenson's work, was in no doubt about where Stevenson's special value was to be found: his 'final fame', he wrote confidently 'will be that of an essayist, nearest and dearest fame of the prose-writer'. As an 'essayist', he is 'essentially a son of Shem, and his method is the wayward travel of a gipsy'. He builds not - none of that 'octave-spanning architecture' for him 'which attains [its] air of majestic completion,

simply by a roof which shuts out the stars' - but rather, after pitching his tent and lighting his fire, invites you to share a pipe 'as he dreamily chats, now here now there, of his discursive way of life'.³ As he does so, the sun goes down 'and you begin to feel the sweet influences of the Pleiades'. But Le Gallienne is himself indulging in a Stevensonian feint here and goes on to toughen up his image of the essayist as he heavily qualifies that word 'dreamily', for, as we read or 'listen' to him, 'slowly but surely, some well-worn fact, which we had ignored as quite unpromising, begins opening out beneath the eye of Mr Stevenson's meditative reflection like a morning flower'.⁴

As Le Gallienne acknowledges, there is nothing accidental about Stevenson's wayward discursiveness and his fragmentariness: not only did Stevenson himself rail against the realists' 'insane pursuit of completion' in his essay 'A Note on Realism', but in a letter to Frances Sitwell (unfortunately slightly misquoted here) he also admits to enjoying (as the editors say) 'the essayist's freedom to follow thoughts in a non-linear way': 'I have made a lot of progress with my Portfolio paper', he writes, 'but it rambles a little; I like rambling, if the country be pleasant; don't you?'⁵ And 'ramble' he does to great effect, but never aimlessly, never at the least risk of losing his sense of direction - and never without a whole armoury of rhetorical devices with which to dazzle and seduce his followers.

'At the centre of his achievement as an essayist', write the editors, 'is his successful adoption of the familiar style', and they follow this remark with a highly apposite quotation of some of Hazlitt's observations on the genre of the familiar essay - which as they justly add, 'might equally be said to catch the tension in Stevenson's work between playful impressionism and moral sincerity'.⁶

As their analysis proceeds, the components of Stevenson's style come clearly into view: the essays are 'lively, mercurial, constantly changing' and that change will see 'the complex, allusive, playful style' of the 1870s essays give way to a more sober interest in morality and conduct 'and a grimmer view of reality'.⁷ Nonetheless, his detached, ironical view of life remains, contributing to the distinctive character of his style which was also fed by 'his mutableness, his constant variety, his ability to take different stylistic features from different languages, linguistic registers, writers and literary traditions and use them to make a fresh creation that is "Stevensonian"'.⁸ This is well said, and is indeed only

bettered by Michel Le Bris's felicitously expressed summary quoted on pages lxi-lxii which ends thus:

All of this gives the reader that real feeling of jubilation, a feeling of both freedom and discipline when on having experienced the heady lightness of what one imagines an impromptu fantasy one realizes in the very last line that it has all along been a text that is both perfectly mastered and perfectly finished.

An important and recurring meme throughout the essays and acknowledged here in this introduction is mobility – a sort of existential mobility which is not just life enhancing but life-preserving. In 'Crabbed Age and Youth' Lord Beaconsfield is quoted (as novelist) remarking that it is 'extraordinary how hourly and how violently change the feelings of an inexperienced young man', to which Stevenson adds characteristically (and with a nod to Bunyan): '[...] this mobility is a special talent entrusted to his care; a sort of indestructible virginity; a magic armour with which he can pass unhurt through great dangers and come unbedaubed out of the miriest passages. Let him voyage, speculate, see all that he can, do all that he may; his soul has as many lives as a cat [...]'. It reflects not just a sentiment but a timbre which gives a special resonance to the Stevenson voice and which is consistently there unifying all his expression into a whole we recognise as 'Stevensonian'.

It is certainly true, as Professor Abrahamson says in his Introduction that Stevenson's 'restless, amiable, conversational style very soon took on the identity of "R.L.S."'. It was the *Cornhill's* practice to append the author's initials to most of the articles, but only Stevenson's articles exuded such a strong individuality that the initials became a persona independent of the specific articles.⁹ It is also true that that fictional persona 'is not a static character'. In the introductory 'Stevenson as Essayist' we find the editors claiming that '[in] all these essays we can see a persona not only with a distinctive style but also with a recognizable world-view or attitude to life. What we do not find, however, is the adoption of a stable persona such as Steele and Addison or Lamb [...]'. The rest of this important paragraph deserves to be quoted too because it describes something central to the recognition of that 'unexpectedly confident voice' heard as early as 1874 and eventually subsumed in our recognition of Stevenson, the master stylist. Here is it in part:

[... T]he essays reveal to us a person who is convinced that none of us can know more than partial truth and that communication of meaning and feelings requires literary skills by both speaker/writer and listener/reader, and even then can never be completely successful. [...] Stevenson is convinced that scientific or philosophical abstractions are less satisfying than the constructions of the creative imagination and yet he welcomes the insights that come from the new disciplines of evolutionary science and anthropology.¹⁰

Stressing the unifying properties of this persona is, hopefully, to help establish a bridgehead from which other editorial forays into the essays may choose to advance. When they do so, I look forward to more attention being given to Stevenson's humour (particularly in his aphorisms), not least because it often provides the vehicle which most ably conveys that celebrated lightness of touch which vivifies without diminishing Stevenson's serious tenets. ('What the writer [of short studies] can't vivify' he declares roundly in 'Preface, By Way of Criticism', 'should be left out'.) When a reader comes across this: 'There is some meaning in the old theory about wild oats; and a man who has not had his green-sickness and got done with it for good, is as little to be depended on as an unvaccinated infant', he or she does not have to rely on the appearance of the initials R.L.S. to identify the writer.

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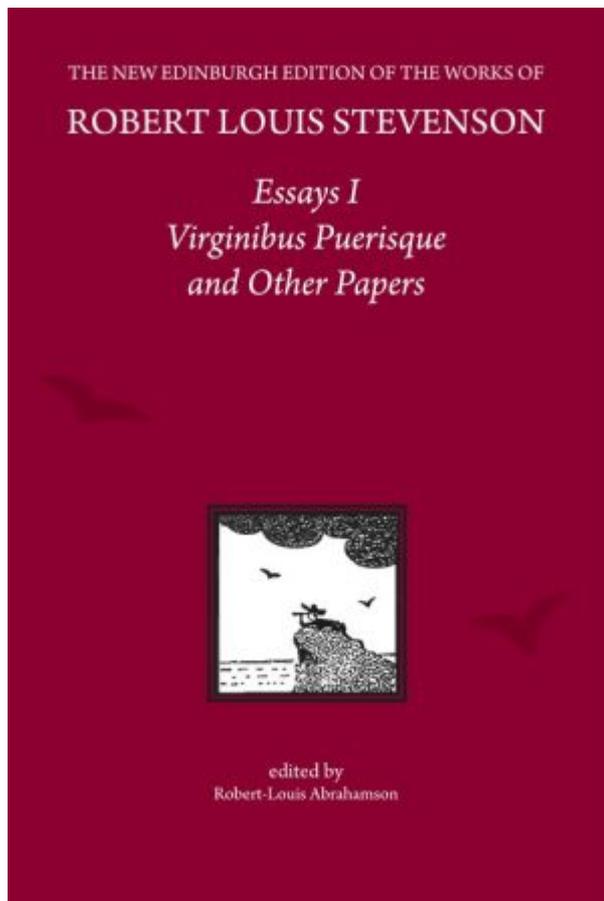
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