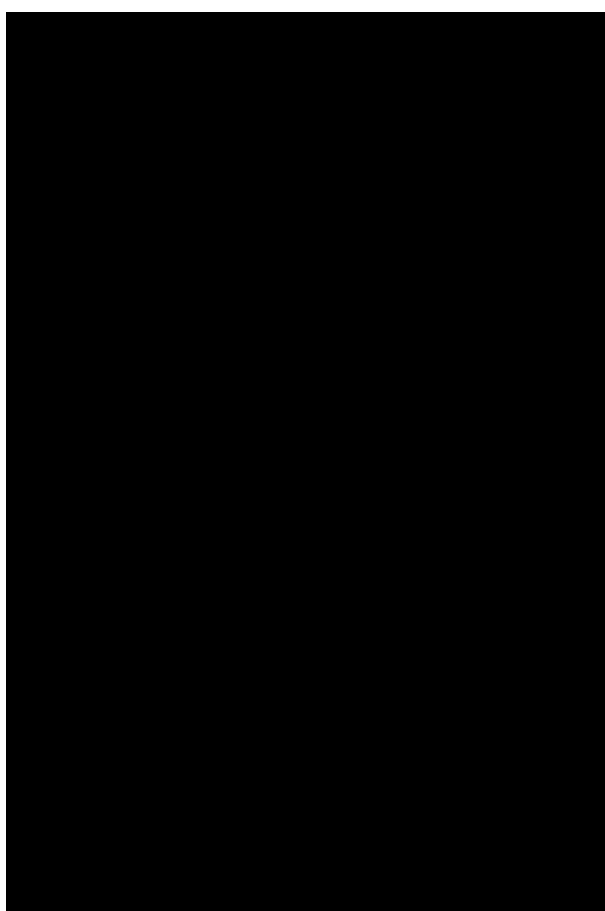


'Essays I: Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers' by Robert Louis Stevenson; edited by Robert-Louis Abrahamson

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.

There is a pleasing briskness about the opening formalities, though that briskness might have been modified just a little when it resulted in the heading *Note on the Text* losing its indefinite article; but that is an insignificant matter of personal taste. More important is the entirely adequate (as *esse sorom ma e* of

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

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.

Amongst the several layers of humour here, not the least engaging is the writer's self-deprecatory adoption of the accents of a pontificating grey-beard when he himself was all of twenty-eight perhaps a little too soon to be quite sure that he has got over his green-sickness! Care needs to be taken, however, when that lightness of touch comes up for discussion. When the editors here talk about a syntactic lightness being closely connected with a lightness of world-view, there is real danger of the sentence being taken as a reductive evaluation of Stevenson's matter (which the rest of the paragraph does not entirely dispel).¹¹

It would also be good to see a more generous exploration of foreign commentators on the essay from our own day and of home-grown ones too. It is true that a substantial list has been provided on p. lxi but only Michel Le Bris is allowed a slightly extended argument (already referred to). One consequence of this is that the editors' contention that [] there continues to be a lack of scholarly interest in his essays¹², and that Stevenson's essays have received very

little critical attention and have been assigned to a secondary status in his oeuvre for over a hundred years ¹³ escapes the interrogation it deserves. In addition to and distinct from the twentieth-century luminaries mentioned in their list, the present reviewer has devoted a lengthy chapter on the nature of the essay in *Masters of the Hovering Life: Robert Musil and R. L. Stevenson*.¹⁴ Although that chapter concentrates on *The Man Without Qualities*, which is almost as much about the essay-form as anything else, I sought to draw attention to Susan Sontag's excellent essay on Roland Barthes who is surely the most committed exponent and the most searching anatomist of the essay-form in our time. I find it impossible not to think of Stevenson when I read this: All of Barthes' work is an exploration of the histrionic or the ludic []. For Barthes, as for Nietzsche, the point is not to teach us something in particular. The point is to make us bold, agile, subtle, intelligent, detached. And to give pleasure. Just like Stevenson we might say!

This in turn allows me to finish by quoting from the author who, in his writings in the 1930s *The Man Without Qualities* was not, however, translated and published in Great Britain until the mid-fifties carried the evolution of the essay-form further, though at the same time, still showing its Stevensonian antecedents. Here is Musil's Ulrich in one of his intercalated essays offering an insight into the essay-form which surely helps when we once again try to come to grips with one of the most elusive yet most significant of Victorian writers:

The accepted translation of essay as attempt contains only vaguely the essential allusion to the literary model, for the essay is not a provisional or incidental expression of a conviction capable of being elevated to a truth under more favourable circumstances or of being exposed as an error – an essay is rather the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in a decisive thought.

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