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The Bottle Imp

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The Only Art is to Omit

In this issue of *The Bottle Imp*, we celebrate the work – the art – of Robert Louis Stevenson. Why such focus on a single writer? Of course, we owe our very name to one of Stevenson's South Sea stories, so perhaps we are biased: the first seven editions of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* do not give him house room; and the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* mentions him not at all. Perhaps our Caledonian enthusiasm for a fellow Scot has led us astray; after all, as recently as 2009, a critic writing in a Scottish broadsheet relegated Stevenson to the lower leagues of literature. This critic, it should be said, was a food critic, but still ...

Wait, hang on, hold hard: what? Are we speaking here of Stevenson, of *Robert Louis Stevenson*, one of the greatest literary artists of all time? Apparently, we are. Stevenson – widely celebrated in his lifetime, and in the years following his untimely, early death – suffered an artistic eclipse in the aftermath of the First World War. Perhaps, like Sir Walter Scott, he was too associated with that prelapsarian Victorian age, too much a favourite of the old men; perhaps as well he failed to fit within the modern structures of literary criticism being raised in clean concrete on the ruins of the nineteenth century. A minor writer, a purveyor of sea-stories, of boys' adventures; not fit for adult consideration, among the bakelite and aspidistras of last century's *avant-garde*.

But – hold the Anglophone, what's this? Here is Jorge Luis Borges, carrying a torch:

I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, etymologies, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson.

And in Europe, Italo Calvino could also see the light:

Among the writers I have always read and, willy-nilly, have taken as a model is R. L. Stevenson. This is because Stevenson himself wrote the books he would have liked to read, because he, who was so delicate an artist, imitated old adventure stories and then relived them himself. To him, writing meant translating an invisible text containing the quintessential fascination of all adventures, all mysteries, all conflicts of will and passion scattered throughout the books of hundreds of writers; it meant translating them into his own precise and almost impalpable prose, into his own rhythm which was like that of dance-steps at once impetuous and controlled.

Precise, almost impalpable prose: if Stevenson has a defining characteristic, it is surely this. Stories that flow and sparkle like clear water, words smooth as polished pebbles that roll and click and tumble, and lie deep within the memory. We must remember, I suppose, that Botticelli's works hung dusty and unloved through three centuries, before his blatant genius was once again remarked upon – but it shakes the faith, nonetheless, that such colossal errors can be made: that such art can pass, quite literally, beneath the noses of writers and academics, and go unrecognised.

But times have changed, and are changing still. The odd half-baked opinion aside, Stevenson is now receiving the recognition his life and work deserves. Strongly, proudly Scottish, and at the same time international, a world writer and writer of the world, Stevenson is an artist whom few can equal. Rest assured, the eighth edition of the *Norton Anthology* (2006) gives him his place. Perhaps the twentieth century was too rigid to appreciate him, too monolithic: maybe our own more fractured age, though, will have sufficient space to accommodate him. Stevenson's work is littoral, not literal: the truth lives at the edges, and on the long horizon.

So here, then, is our small offering. We are delighted to present Barry Menikoff, analysing **Stevenson on Style**; Richard Dury charts RLS's weaving ways in **Stevenson's Shifting Viewpoint**; and Penny Fielding sends word on **The New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson**. Julia Reid shows why Stevenson's non-fiction could be hair-raising for his contemporaries, in "**Newspaper like in style, and not worthy of R.L.S.**": **Stevenson's *The Amateur Emigrant***; David Melville explores ambiguities in **Tempting the Angels: "Olalla" as Gothic Vampire**

Narrative; Alistair Braidwood follows other bloodlines in **We're all Henry Jekyll's Bairns: Stevenson's Enduring Influence on Scottish Literature**; and Linda Dryden brings us news of the celebration of Stevenson at **Edinburgh Napier University**.

A little modern spice is added to the proceedings, too, with David Borthwick's "**Driven by Loneliness and Silence**": **John Burnside's Susceptible Solitaries**, and John Paul O'Malley's **Interview with Don Paterson**. Maggie Scott lights our way for us with **Leerie** as the Scots word of the season, and Alison Grant digs in her sea-chest to bring out **Eilean** and **Innis**. And still there is room among the electrons for **book reviews** and all our other regular columns – not to mention free, downloadable ebook editions of **Robert Louis Stevenson's Fables**. So, now: Fetch aft the rum, Darby!

The Unreliable Narrator



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