

## THE SPIRIT AND ART OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

**I**T was by his spirit and his art that Robert Louis Stevenson achieved his great distinction in nineteenth-century literature. He wrote essays full of matter and stories full of entertainment, but it is the spirit of the essays and the art of the stories that have distinguished them above the work of many other essayists who are as thoughtful and many other novelists who are as entertaining. Essays more profound and novels more illuminating to life and society have been written by people far less famous than Stevenson, but those writers failed to catch the popular imagination as he did because they had not his spirit or they had not his art.

I am not treating Stevenson historically now. That may be left to the future historian of nineteenth-century literature, who will find that Stevenson has an important and permanent place in the history of nineteenth-century English literature, because he did more than any other one writer to expel from English literature the depressing pessimism of the latter nineteenth century, and to reintroduce into fiction healthy activity in place of morbidity and triviality. But Stevenson is too near our own time to be regarded merely as an historical influence. He is still a vital influence among readers who read, not merely to be instructed, but because they want to be entertained and because they want to be helped by one whose writings have been helpful to men. By his gallant spirit Stevenson continues to help many who need help, and by his cunning art he continues to entertain many who crave entertainment. It is not the depth of his thought,

but the vivacity of his thought, which helps most. It is not the mere adventure, but the art with which he relates the adventure, that makes his stories enduringly entertaining.

Stevenson's spirit was the spirit of a brave man, of an absolutely brave man, of an absolutely and cheerfully brave man. All that means a good deal; there are many brave people in the world, but not all of them are absolutely brave, and yet fewer are consistently cheerful in their courage. To be as brave as Stevenson two things are necessary: first, that a man be constantly in peril, and secondly, that he be gallantly indifferent to his peril. That was the spirit of Stevenson—gallantly indifferent to peril that was never absent. In this glad world there are many people who are always healthy and always singing at their work. In this sad world there are many people who are always ill and yet too brave to murmur. But Stevenson was always ill and always singing. We feel that a well man should always work and always be cheerful about his work. We feel that a sick man should rest, but that he ought to be patient and resigned. But when we find a sick man always working and always radiantly cheerful in his work and suffering, we find the rare exception—we find Robert Louis Stevenson.

He was an invalid all his life, seeking the wide world over, from the wintry Orkney Islands to the perpetual summer of the South Pacific Islands—seeking, not health, but merely a place where he could live and do his day's work—and always brave and cheerful, always heartening others with his eager friendship and his writings.

He was ill from infancy, probably inherited from his mother a weak chest and a nervous system too highly strung for placid peace. Poor health prevented systematic schooling, though he attended different schools of Edinburgh in a desultory way. Poor health prevented assiduous study at

## Spirit and Art of Robert Louis Stevenson 103

Edinburgh University, though he was an omnivorous reader. Because a pedagogue is writing this essay, a dull little moral is due just here. The charming essay "Some College Memories" warns students against too much study, advising them that health is more precious than learning. It is right counsel so far as it goes, but it is not desperately needed in most latitudes. In twenty years of teaching I have known only one student to break down from too much study,—and it was dreadful and all wrong,—but I have known several thousand who did not break down from over-study.

At the university Stevenson took the course in engineering, intending to be a lighthouse engineer, like his kinsmen and forebears. He did sufficient work to get a medal for a special paper on lighthouse improvements, but his health was too frail for him to practise the profession, and he had a serious breakdown not long after graduation. So he studied law, and at twenty-five was admitted to the bar, but never practised. Then he had a few years of tolerable health and was busy writing, studying Scottish history, contributing essays to the "Cornhill Magazine" and his first stories to "Temple Bar" magazine. At twenty-nine he had broken down again, and, at San Francisco and Monterey, seemed about to die. But he rallied and was married instead—to an American lady, Mrs. Fannie Van de Grift Osbourne. They went for health and a honeymoon to a deserted mining camp near Calistoga, and out of this visit Stevenson afterward made a book, "The Silverado Squatters."

The marriage had not pleased Stevenson's family, who were Scotch Presbyterians and therefore suspicious of marriage to a divorcée; but after a while they were reconciled, and Stevenson took his wife to the parental home. Scot-

## 104      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

land's is not the climate for diseased lungs, and it was now manifest that Stevenson was chronically ill of tuberculosis. For eight years his life, as his biographer says, "seemed to hang by a thread." But his courage never failed. He traveled from health resort to health resort on the Continent, back to Scotland and to England in the intervals, writing, writing all the time, and gladdening with his radiant spirit those with whom he came in contact.

Doubtless the death of his father, whom Stevenson loved and honored with even more than usual filial affection, made it comparatively easy for him to take his mother and his wife finally away from Scotland; for, though he was a loyal Scotsman, he never relished the Scottish climate. So he started for Colorado, but, on landing in New York, was persuaded to go instead to the Adirondacks, where he spent a winter at Saranac, very busy with some fiction that has become famous,—“The Master of Ballantrae,”—and with some no less famous essays written under contract for “Scribner’s Magazine,” including “The Christmas Sermon,” an essay which is likely to be read as long as people read English. In June, 1888, Stevenson, being thirty-eight years of age, embarked on a yachting tour of the South Seas with his family, S. S. McClure having provided funds, in return for which Stevenson was to write letters of travel for the McClure Company.

There were some two years of travel in the Pacific seas, visits to Hawaii and the leper settlement at Molokai, which gave rise to that scathing piece of righteous indignation, the letter in defense of Father Damien, who had given his life to the lepers and whose character had been aspersed by one who should have known better. There were visits to other and remoter islands, adventures amusing and thrilling, and finally in 1890 Stevenson settled down for four years—his

last four years—in Samoa, where he purchased a home, became a sort of feudal chief, and was all but adored by the natives, who called him "Tusitala," meaning "Teller of Tales." He took an active part in Samoan affairs, exposed the incompetency, or worse, of the representatives of the three powers (the United States, Germany, and England), had these officers dismissed, and while never himself the accredited agent of the powers, he became the spokesman of Samoa to the world at large. Indeed, for most of us Robert Louis Stevenson *is* Samoa. He and a certain hurricane have made for us an actual place of what would otherwise be a fly-speck on the map of the Pacific Ocean.

One afternoon late in 1894, about a month after his forty-fourth birthday, he was laughing and talking in his gay manner with his wife, when suddenly a startled look crossed his face and he fell at her feet. A blood-vessel had burst in his brain, and two hours later he was dead. It has been said that Robert Louis Stevenson died of good health. His general condition had greatly improved, his blood had become so enriched in volume and quality that the vessels, weakened by long illness, were not strong enough to bear the pressure.

I have never regarded myself as belonging to the Stevenson "cult," that inner circle of the devout, who, as has been said, rate literature with "Stevenson first, Shakespeare a poor second, and the Bible hardly a poor third." But I shall never forget the December afternoon when I was hanging on a strap in a New York elevated railway train, and, unfolding my paper, read that Stevenson was dead. The world suddenly seemed empty, like a house from which the one most loved has moved away.

Sixty Samoan natives cut a path through the forest on Mount Vaea, and to the mountain's top they bore his body,

## 106      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

and on the mountain top they buried him, as he would have wished it, for so he had sung it in "Requiem":

"Under the wide and starry sky  
Dig the grave and let me lie.  
Glad did I live and gladly die,  
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you 'grave for me:  
'Here he lies where he longed to be;  
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill.' "

As the reflective man gets older he realizes that some of the wisest things are said by people with no special reputation for cleverness, who merely sum up life's experience in a colorless phrase. As daylight reveals the object without attracting attention to itself, so their simple language leaves us nothing to think about but the thought itself. Not long ago I was with some companions in a railway station. In another group stood an elderly woman surrounded by her friends. She was starting for New York, where an eminent medical specialist was to make a final examination which in all probability would result in a verdict of certain death from a terrible disease, but she was laughing and chatting as cheerily as if she were starting on a pleasure trip. Then a member of my party, a woman who set up no claim to cleverness, said, "After all, it is really easier to be entirely brave."

That is the text. To be partly brave is to be sometimes troubled by fear; to be entirely brave is to be never troubled by fear. To be partly brave is to be sometimes depressed; to be entirely brave is to be joyous with a lyric joy. Men

who lead complex human affairs and human struggles understand this; to be only sometimes brave means sometimes to compromise, and compromise always means trouble; to compromise nothing is to be always on solid ground and at ease. So if a man is merely looking for the easiest way, he should be always entirely brave; but a man who is always looking for the easiest way has not enough manhood to be entirely brave. Therefore, we must turn the proposition around: the man who is entirely brave finds that he has hit upon the easiest way. That was Stevenson: he was so brave that he found the way easy—joyous and songful.

Gilbert Chesterton says: "Stevenson did not face his troubles as a Stoic, he faced them as an Epicurean; . . . his resignation can only be called an active and uproarious resignation. . . . Stevenson's great ethical and philosophical value lies in the fact that he realized this great paradox, that life becomes more fascinating the darker it grows, that life is worth living only in so far as it is difficult to live. He discovered that a battle was more comforting than a truce."

It was in this spirit that Stevenson met life and found its meaning and stated that meaning in one sentence, which is the key to his philosophy: "We do not, properly speaking, love life at all, but living." That sentence is from the essay "*Æs Triplex*" ("*Triple Brass*") in "*Virginibus Puerisque*," an essay that every man and woman should read, because it tells us how to meet death by being so occupied with living that we have no time to fear death, or even to think about it.

It was to the advantage of this philosopher and his readers that he who could live so bravely could also write bravely, that he had a gift of expression as gaily confident, as insouciant and gallant as his own courageous heart. In Stevenson's style, or styles,—for indeed he is a man of many styles,—there is a special fulfilment of the French definition

## 108 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

of style: "The style is the man." The light and variable quality of the man, the versatility, the grace and ease, and withal the combination of sobriety and verve, are all reflected in his literary styles.

This "Æs Triplex," like many other things he wrote, is fine literature both because it says something important and because it says it in a rarely attractive manner. This and many other essays of Stevenson fulfil that conception of literature which he expounded in his essay on "Walt Whitman": "Any conviction, even if it be a whole system or a whole religion, must pass into a condition of commonplace, or postulate, before it becomes fully operative. Strange excursions and high-flying theories may interest, but they cannot rule behavior. . . . It is not by forcing him on from one subject to another that the man will be effectually renewed. He cannot be made to believe anything; but he can be made to see that he has always believed. . . . If any ideal is possible, it must be already in the thoughts of the people."

Obviously on this theory of literature—and it is surely an entirely correct theory—the literary form is extremely important. For if the author says merely what is in the subconscious thought of everybody, he must manifestly say it better than most people can say it, in order that he may bring it out of the subconsciousness into the active consciousness as a principle of living. It is the author's way of saying a thing which suddenly makes us realize that we ourselves have often vaguely thought the same thing, but never before realized its significance because we never put it into words.

Then Stevenson proceeds to say: "Whitman is alive to all this; he sees that if the poet is to be of any help, he must testify to the livableness of life." So, according to Steven-



son, this is the manner of literature, to compel men by the aptness of literary expression to see what it is that they have been vaguely believing all their lives; and its object is to show that life, with all its unsatisfactoriness, is a very livable thing.

Those are the two conditions which he fulfils in this admirable essay "Æs Triplex." The theme of the essay is the constant proximity of death and the average mortal's indifference to death, which is a sign of mental health, and the best assurance of getting something accomplished in the brief years that lie between birth and the grave. If one really dreaded death as much as our conventional language implies, he would be paralyzed for all effort. "As a matter of fact," says Stevenson, "although few things are spoken of with more fearful whisperings than this prospect of death, few have less influence on conduct under healthy circumstances."

That is a true and far-reaching remark, and concerns the idea of scaring people into righteousness. A white gentleman heard a negro preacher describe to his congregation the awful cold of hell, telling them, in that vividly illiterate style of which the negro is so often a master, how they would freeze and freeze through all eternity. When, after the sermon, the white man protested that this was contrary to the orthodox view of hell, the preacher exclaimed, "Lawd! Boss, you can't scare dem niggers by tellin' 'em hell 's hot." Fear, as a motive force, is a very temporary thing. There is a dash of recklessness in human beings which makes them "take a chance." You may see this illustrated any day where traffic is congested on Fifth Avenue, in New York. A man will pause just so long before crossing the street, but if the traffic does not presently stop, he will dart into the thick of it, "taking the chance." The peril is as great when

he starts as when he paused, but the impatience to be about his business is stronger than deterring fear. Fear may make us hesitate, but it will not make us stop.

Stevenson cites proverbial examples of healthy people's recklessness of death—very old people, men living at the foot of a volcano, the whole human race swimming giddily through space on a planet which may at any time meet an obstruction and finish its course.

Seeing that the only thing we are absolutely sure of is that we must die, and seeing that there is always a fair possibility that we may die before the sun has run its next twenty-four-hour circuit, we might well spend our lives shivering with apprehension were there not in us something stronger than fear—the instinct to live. It is not ambition that keeps us going, but “the plain satisfaction of living, of being about [our] business in some sort or other.” “As courage and intelligence are the two qualities best worth a good man's cultivation, so it is the first part of intelligence to recognize our precarious estate in life, and the first part of courage to be not at all abashed before the fact,” to reckon “life as a thing to be dashingly used and cheerfully hazarded.”

He remembers that Dickens and Thackeray each died with an uncompleted novel in his desk, and he surmises that if it were not for this reckless scorn of death, no man would ever commence a full-length piece of work. “By all means begin your folio,” he says; “even if the doctor does not give you a year, even if he hesitates about a month, make one brave push and see what can be accomplished in a week. . . . All who have meant good work with their whole hearts, have done good work, although they died before they have had time to sign it. Every heart that has beat strong and cheerfully has left a hopeful impulse behind it in the world, and bettered the tradition of mankind.”

And then one remembers that in this, as in most things, Stevenson lived as he wrote, beginning fresh work before the sheets were dry from the blood of the last hemorrhage, and, dying, left two unfinished novels, perhaps his best—"St. Ives" and "Weir of Hermiston."

Stevenson could find no answer to Hamlet's question as to the meaning of life, nor did the question interest him. But in every day's activity he found the satisfaction of living. In his fine essay, "Old Mortality," he says: "To believe in immortality is one thing, but it is first needful to believe in life. . . . The average sermon flies the point, disporting itself in that eternity of which we know, and need to know, so little; avoiding the bright, crowded, and momentous fields of life, where destiny awaits us." This man, who for forty-four years hung over eternity by a thread slenderer and more brittle than supports most men, declined to fret himself at all about eternity. He was an optimist in many senses, including that of the Irishman who fell from a twelve-story building and as he passed the sixth story remarked, "All 's well so far."

And the lesson, if we would grasp it, is a salutary one, that if we bring our wills to bear on it we get most happiness when our possessions are smallest, being then most thrown back upon ourselves, where ultimately we must find happiness if we find it at all. It has been said that if you give an Irishman half a chance he is fine, but if you give him no chance whatever he is superb. Stevenson was Scotch by birth, but he had a superabundance of the Celtic instinct. He understood the meaning of death so well that he was resolved to understand living still better, with the result that one of the liveliest expressions of the gratification of being alive came from a man who was most of his life in a dying condition.

## 112 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

There is the same paradox in his understanding of courage and its opposite. This bravest of men comprehended fear so well that his depictions of fear are among his masterpieces, as in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," "The Ebb Tide," "Markheim," "The Master of Ballantrae," "Treasure Island," and many others, not forgetting the nameless terror of "Some College Memories." This is the final touch in Stevenson's courage, that he could have been horribly afraid and was not, that he could have dreaded death and did not. All courage is fine, but the finest of all courage is the courage of the man who could be a coward if he would, but elects to be a hero instead.

And, by the same token, there is in all the virtue of Stevenson a quality of self-consciousness which was part of his delicately poised artistic nature. There is a virtue which is unconscious of itself, and there is a virtue which is conscious of itself, and both are virtuous. And perhaps, after all, only the virtue which is conscious of itself can express itself in art. A dog's love for its master is the symbol of self-effacing, absolute love, but the dog cannot make literature out of its love; Mrs. Browning could, and she did not love Robert Browning the less because she was able to tell him how much she loved him in the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." Like Charles Lamb, like his favorite Montaigne, Stevenson was an egotist, but, also like them, he was a beloved egotist. And he always had a liking for frank and engaging egotists, and knew how to create them in literature with skill—like Captain Burke in "The Master of Ballantrae," like St. Ives, like Alan Breck, panting with the exertion of the fight in the roundhouse, and turning to David to ask in childlike joy, "Am I no a bonny fighter?" Stevenson did not have to despise himself in order to love other men; because he was intensely interested in his own life and pur-

suits, he had a livelier interest in everybody's life and pursuits.

One of Stevenson's crowning virtues was his utter sanity, and out of that same interest in everything, including himself, there flowed a stream of human-kindness, of sympathy, of comprehension of life in its true values, which has uttered itself in many volumes, and made all the world love him for his sweetness, as it has admired him for his courage. His philosophy is as notable for its sweetly modulated reasonableness as it is for its dashing courage. Only a brave man could have written "*Æs Triplex*," only a loving and lovable man could have written "*A Christmas Sermon*": "To be honest, to be kind, to earn a little and to spend a little less, to make upon the whole a family happier for his presence, to renounce when that shall be necessary and not to be embittered, to keep a few friends but those without capitulation—above all, on the same grim conditions, to keep friends with himself—here is a task for all that a man has of fortitude and delicacy."

The spirit of courage, of hope, of inexhaustible interest in life, and of frank egotism is the spirit of youth; and youth, eternal and incorrigible youth, is Stevenson's sign-manual, both in his spirit and his art. In the conclusion of "*Æs Triplex*" he says, referring to the reckless way in which brave men die: "When the Greeks made their fine saying that those whom the gods love die young, I cannot help believing that they had this sort of death in their eye. For surely, at whatever age it overtake the man, this is to die young. Death has not been suffered to take so much as one illusion from his heart." In the dedication of "*Virginibus Puerisque*" he says that he appears as "*Advocatus Juventutis*," the pleader for "life at twenty-five," the supporter of youth's arguments against the arguments of age. In the

## 114 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

essay "Youth and Age" he writes that when an old man wags his head and says to a youngster, "Ah, so I thought when I was your age," it should be competent for the young man to reply, "My venerable sir, so I shall probably think when I am yours,"—meaning that one is as likely to be right as the other, one as likely to be wrong. Stevenson was forty-four when he died, and a wise man; but in his feelings he never got beyond twenty-five, perhaps never beyond fifteen. That is why he was England's greatest writer of real literature for boys. He never stopped *feeling* like a boy.

The secret of his art, like the secret of his spirit,—for I am drifting away from the spirit of the man to considerations of his art,—is this unwearied youthfulness. I am about to quote again from Mr. Chesterton, my only apology for doing so being that I was not clever enough to think of this before Mr. Chesterton had said it. Chesterton is contrasting the placid and passive state of childhood with the active, adventurous state of boyhood, and is noting that although there is an abundance of art for children, there is little true art for boys: "The finest and most peculiar work of Stevenson is rather that he was the first writer to treat seriously and poetically the æsthetic instincts of the boy. He celebrated the toy gun rather than the rattle. Around the child and his rattle there has gathered a splendid service of literature and art: Hans Andersen and Charles Kingsley and George Macdonald and Walter Crane and Kate Greenaway. . . . And then he [the boy] is suddenly dropped with a crash out of literature and can read nothing but 'Jack Valiant among the Indians.' For in the whole scene there is only one book which is at once literature, like Hans Andersen, and yet a book for boys and not for children, and its name is 'Treasure Island.' "

Stevenson quotes from a stricture by Mr. James on

## Spirit and Art of Robert Louis Stevenson 115

"Treasure Island," in which Mr. James says, "I have been a child but I have never been on a quest for buried treasure." "Here is indeed a wilful paradox," says Stevenson by way of reply, "for if he has never been on a quest for buried treasure, it can be demonstrated that he has never been a child. There never was a child (unless Master James) but has hunted gold and been a pirate and a military commander and a bandit of the mountains." Stevenson has taken the things that boys think about and clothed them in a cultivated art, thereby giving the boy, at one and the same time, what the boy wants and what he *ought* to have—a satisfaction of his craving for adventure, and an unconscious education in literary art. Of course, he has done something which the boy never sees, ought not to see—he has related these breathless adventures with a charming, half-suppressed humor. The older reader catches the twinkle in Stevenson's eye while he is reciting these blood-curdling unrealities, but the boy takes it all in solemn earnest. It is melodrama with a smile.

Stevenson's imagination was the gift of youth, but his art was the product of almost incredible toil. And once more the pedagogue mounts the rostrum. Stevenson has written an "Apology for Idlers." College students have been known to find balm and solace in this essay, but they who have soothed their souls with this have generally neglected to read the essay called "A College Magazine" and the series of essays entitled "The Art of Writing." These contain no counsel for idleness, but rather for sustained labor such as only a brave and purposeful soul is capable of. They tell the story of how Stevenson learned to write through many years of harder toil than most day laborers could endure.

With the most painstaking toil, he studied the masters of

## 116 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

style, analyzed their methods and effects, and imitated them in many volumes of manuscript. Whether work of this sort is the only way to learn to write, as he avers, is an open question; but it is not an open question that the only way to learn to write is to work. Merely to read the account of Stevenson's apprenticeship to letters is enough to make a lazy man tired. It has been said that he would write a three-volume novel, cut it down to a one-volume novel, rewrite that into a short story, and then burn the short story.

The proverb tells us that there is no royal road to learning, and assuredly there is no royal road to art. An amateur painter was showing his productions to a trained artist, *prattling foolish platitudes* about "little things that I dashed off in idle moments," and concluded with "I never took a painting lesson in my life." "So I see," said the artist, "but why did n't you?" Some true art has been "dashed off" in an ecstasy of inspiration, but only by men who have studied their technique through wearisome plodding years of application; the same painter who "does" a portrait at a sitting may take six weeks to do the next. The problem is to make it "come right." It may come right in a flash, or it may come right only by slow and laborious processes; but it never comes right except from the trained hand, and the trained hand, or the trained mind, is the product of long and self-sacrificing toil.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" in three days, but "The Master of Ballantrae" was the result of years of thinking and months of writing; and both were the result of a lifetime of "learning how." So this Stevenson, with a boy's heart and essays in defense of idleness, turns out to be just one of the hardest-working men that ever acquired skill by unrelenting endeavor, turns out to be about the least consolation that a lazy man could find.



His wife reports that the way he worked was "appalling," and the magnitude of the results "almost incredible."

Not Thomas Carlyle himself was more completely and deliberately a man of letters by profession than was Stevenson, and his essay on "The Morality of the Profession of Letters" shows how high and grave an estimate he set on the profession of his choice. The great difference between Carlyle and Stevenson was that Stevenson believed that the chief object of literature is to entertain, and Carlyle believed that its chief object is to teach. Carlyle was first the moralist and afterward the artist; Stevenson was first the artist and afterward the moralist.

Because Stevenson took this lighter view of the purpose of literature, he was content to expend his great and cultivated art on things Carlyle would have scorned, and most serious novelists would not consent to—tales of adventure, of buried treasure, of pirates, of wreckers, of beach-combers; sometimes of adventures in the forest, but more generally of adventures by sea, for the passion of the sea has gripped nobody harder than Stevenson. He responded to it in all its moods, its cruel treachery as in "The Merry Men," its vastness as in "The Master of Ballantrae," its mystery as in "Treasure Island" and a score of others, its adventures as in nearly all the books, including "Kidnapped," "The Wrecker," and "The Ebb Tide." But perhaps the chief fascination of the sea for Stevenson—aside from atavism, inherited tastes from his seafaring ancestors and his island home—was that on the sea, as nowhere else, he observed life in the terms he loved, man's struggle to live amid continual threatenings of death.

To the fastidious it seems a pity—and perhaps it is a pity—that this sensitive and highly trained artist spent so much of his energy, his character, and his delicate art on tales that hitherto had been written chiefly for the "penny

## 118 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

dreadful" and the "dime library." The fact of the matter is that, to the end of his days, Stevenson was still experimenting, still practising his art, still getting ready to do the great things he had in mind, and then he died before he was ready.

There was a good deal of Scotch caution in Stevenson. With all his facility and various talents, he ventured but warily on new kinds of work. Thus he was well past forty before he attempted a full-length picture of a woman, feeling that this was too delicate a task for his art—surely an impressive instance of artistic humility. Such hesitation was just an indication of the fastidious and self-critical artist that Stevenson was by nature; he was unwilling to attempt a thing until he felt that his art was strong enough to carry it through.

Two sides of his nature express themselves in his artistic hesitation to venture on the greatest things, and in his determined active employment in the cultivation of his art. Those who are widely acquainted with academic minds know that in most of our colleges there are men who are waiting to write the great book of science, or the great book of literature, until they feel that their science, or their art, is sufficient for the task which they have proposed. Stevenson would have understood those men, for he also hesitated until he felt himself equipped; but, unlike those men, he did not wait in quiescence until time and the event should bring to him the gifts he craved; he spent the interim in the busiest exercise of his art for the sake of the art, intending to apply it to the large things later. He did not merely bide his time; instead, he wrote boys' books of adventure, and into everything he wrote poured all the best of the art he had acquired up to that time.

But if Stevenson was the true son of his active father, he

was also the true son of his mother's house—the Balfours, scholars and theologians. In "The Manse" he described with relish his maternal grandfather, the Reverend Lewis Balfour, and traced some of his own qualities back to that severe man of learning, speculating, in his whimsical way, on the possibility that there had been chance and unrecognized meetings between the Reverend Lewis Balfour and the grandfather of Thomas Stevenson, neither dreaming that their blood would mingle in a common descendant, part adventurer and part philosopher. But so it was to be, with the result that Robert Louis Stevenson wrote tales of adventure shot through with such philosophy as had not before been found in tales of adventure. Stevenson had the curiosity of a boy about foreign lands and strange seas and hidden treasure, but he had the curiosity of a man and a philosopher about that most curious of all mundane things, the workings of the human mind, and the working out of human destinies.

Whether as essayist or novelist, he had a mystic's fascination in speculating on the strange ways in which a man and his ancestors combine to promote destiny. In that same essay "The Manse," and again in the essay "Pastoral," he is seeking in his various forebears for the explanation of his own contradictory moods and whims, finding one quality in one ancestor, another in another, and so on through a long line, studying the family tree, at the top of which sits, munching nuts, the first of them all, labeled "probably arboreal." It was a mystic, absorbingly interested in man's multiple personalities, and in his own subconscious self, who wrote those terrible stories of crime and psychics, "Markheim" and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

It has been said that "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" "showed Stevenson as Poe with the addition of

## 120 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

a moral sense." That was the Scotch Presbyterian in him. He always referred to ethics as his "veiled mistress," and at one time drafted a book on ethics, which he never finished. With all his art, and with all his belief in the sufficiency of pleasure as the object of art, there was in him a strong feeling that art must present life in its true moral values, a view which has puzzled some of the "art for art's sake" people.

But, after all, the more serious note in Stevenson's writings grows quite as much out of scientific curiosity as out of ethics. In essays like "The Manse" and "Pastoral" he is interested in what might be called distributed personality, the derivatives from many ancestors that meet in one descendant. In stories like "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" and "Markheim" he is interested in alternating personalities and the subconscious self. So, as I see it, the juster statement is that Stevenson stands midway between Poe and Hawthorne. In Poe the psychic interest is purely scientific; in Hawthorne it is primarily moral, with merely enough science to explain morality; while in Stevenson it is, of equal parts, scientific and moral.

So, perhaps, we have discovered one means whereby Stevenson lifts a dime-novel theme into the region of great literature—the injection of metaphysics into stories of pirates, treasure-hunters, and beach-combers. In the typical blood-and-thunder story these are merely men of desperate strength and ferocity. Moralists of Thackeray's kind might infiltrate a little goodness to point the recurrent lesson that there is some good in the worst men. Neither method is Stevenson's. He does not hesitate to make his men irretrievably bad, but he does not make them mere lay-figures of wickedness. He shows their minds working, and, of course, the moment he shows that he has humanized them. He frequently mingles with their desperate and dark deeds, not goodness, but a childlike simplicity, which renders them

human, and because human the more dreadful in their wickedness. Such is Teach the pirate in "The Master of Ballantrae," such is John Silver in "Treasure Island," and such are those desperate and lost men in "The Ebb Tide."

That was a master-stroke in "The Ebb Tide," to have Davis *praying* while on his way to commit the murder.

"Prayer—what for? God knows. But out of his inconsistent, illogical, agitated spirit a stream of supplication was poured forth, inarticulate as himself, earnest as death and judgment."

Then there breaks in on this prayer the crazy, cheerful nonsense of Huish the cockney, whose religion had never reached so deep as the Scot Davis's:

" ' "Thou Gawd seest me!" I remember I had that written in my Bible. I remember the Bible, too, all about Abinadab and parties. Well, Gawd, you're going to see a rum start presently, I promise you that! "

"The captain bounded.

" 'I'll have no blasphemy!' he cried, 'no blasphemy in my boat.' "

And these two men are on their way to commit a cold-blooded murder! The very irrationality of it all makes it horribly human, as the stilted and conventional dime-novel desperado never is. This is the thinking man writing blood-and-thunder literature.

Of course, the purely esthetic element of Stevenson's novels is even stronger than the intellectual. In unity and tonal quality they have not been surpassed in the history of English fiction. His rule of unity in composition was as strict as Poe's: that each story is intended to produce a single effect, and that any sentence or word that jars on, or detracts from, that central idea must be mercilessly extracted.

When we remember the eighteenth-century English novelists, and even so skilful a literary artist as nineteenth-century

## 122 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

Thackeray, we realize that this conception of the *oneness* of a novel has not always prevailed in English literature. Stevenson learned this from the French, and his example has encouraged a care for technique among subsequent English writers which had been seldom observed before he wrote. He did for English romantic fiction something like that which John Keats did for English romantic poetry: he made it entirely artistic; he gave it what I venture to call tonal quality—he fitted a particular tone to a particular sort of romantic story.

The two novels which he left unfinished at the end of his life were both romantic stories of Scotland, but almost unbelievably different in their tone: "St. Ives," gay and sunny, nonchalant and high-spirited in its account of the debonair French officer's adventures in Scotland; "Weir of Hermiston," somber, gray, dour, darksome with pending fate and threatenings of dishonor's doom. Had Stevenson written only those two books, he would have demonstrated his versatility; that he wrote on them alternately, dictating to his stepdaughter now a chapter of one, and now a chapter of the other, as the mood struck him, would seem almost impossible if we did not know that it had been done.

He had an instinct that one kind of story would suit one kind of spot, and that another kind of spot called for another kind of story. In his "Gossip on Romance" he tells how certain gardens suggested to him stories of murder, certain houses ghosts, certain coasts shipwreck. He tells of a ferry which, every time he saw it, seemed to cry out for a story connected with it, and never let him rest until he had invented that story as we find it in "Kidnapped." His wife tells how "names always had a great fascination for him; . . . the flowing, mellifluous sound of 'The Master of Balantrae' he felt gave the impression of elegance and smooth duplicity." For seven years the name lurked in his imagina-

tion, until a novel to match it had been produced. All of which was exactly like John Keats, who was teased and fascinated by a phrase of Provençal French, "*La Belle Dame sans Merci*," until he simply had to write a poem to express the emotion which the words stirred in him—John Keats who cried out,

"Lo! I must tell a tale of chivalry,  
For large white plumes are dancing in mine eye,"

and who after he has described the knight and his plumes has nothing more to say, for he has verbalized his vision.

In the prose writings which particularly pleased Stevenson by their euphony, he would analyze and explore a favorite passage until he found in exactly what repetition and variation of a particular vowel or consonant the charm lurked, and then he would practise these euphonies in his own style, until he had produced a result which could stand before his own critical judgment.

Whether in the atmospheric quality of the picture, or in the unbroken unity of the narrative, or in the rhythm and arrangement of the words, Stevenson was always not merely "literary" but "artistic," a distinction which he himself made, justly observing that Walter Scott, whom he admired extravagantly as "out and away the king of the romantics," was "hardly a great artist; hardly, in the manful sense, an artist at all. He pleased himself and so pleases us. Of the pleasures of his art he tasted fully; but of its toils and vigils and distresses never man knew less." In short, Robert Louis Stevenson was poet as well as romancer, novelist, and essayist. And essentially a poet he must be who will achieve the highest distinction in any of these capacities. Through many years of vigil, Stevenson had cultivated the finest graces of literary art, waiting patiently until he should feel that he could use them for the greatest literary purposes. But

## 124      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

death came before the hour had struck. The best of Stevenson is only a promise of what we should have if he had lived.

And so it comes about that the art of Stevenson is a blend of psychology and adventure, a combination of a man's brain and a boy's heart, an appeal to the thinking man and to the active man, and all done in a literary style which was partly the gift of his fine esthetic instinct, and partly the reward of tireless industry, an art for which he paid the price that must always be paid for the best accomplishment in art—unremitting labor, unsparing pains. The heart of a boy, the mind of a philosopher, the sensibility of an artist, and the will of a purposeful man combined to make these books what they are.

There is the authority of the master—Stevenson himself—for appending a little moral to it all. He, the delicate and sensitive artist, he, the active lover of adventure, he was also the moralist, the worshiper of the "veiled mistress." The moral of Stevenson's art and work seems to be a double one: utter courage, no matter what it is we are facing, no matter what it is that is pending, and complete absorption in the thing we are doing, no matter what it is, if it is only the writing of a boys' tale of adventure. Charles Dickens said that his Golden Rule had always been never to use one hand in doing a thing to which he could apply two hands. Stevenson worked by the same rule. In a sense, Stevenson's life was incomplete; all he did was a preparation for something greater that he was going to do. He did not live to accomplish the greater things. But he did his part; he kept himself fully occupied with the work of preparation; the sequel was with the gods. If the work had to stop before it was finished, that was not his fault. If the exit was called before he had played out his rôle in life's drama, that was not his concern—nor is it ours.

STOCKTON AXSON.