

Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury, eds. *R.L. Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*

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Sections:

I The Pleasures of Reading, Writing, and Popular Culture

II Scotland and the South Seas

III Evolutionary Psychology, Masculinity, and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

IV Textual and Cultural Crossings

This is a fittingly wide-ranging collection of thirty essays by authors from the British Isles, Italy, France, Germany, North America, Singapore and Australia, on a Scottish author whose life and work were themselves of the wide-ranging kind. The publication grew out of a conference held in 2002 in a picturesque and serene setting on the shores of Lake Garda in Italy. For those who were not fortunate enough to be present at the event, the editors' preface and introduction convey an idea of how the characters of people and place came together to inform a volume whose aggregate nature may well be expressed in Stevenson's own terms, as being a familiar study of a man and his books.

Having thus described the volume as an organic whole that is more than a sum of the abovementioned thirty articles or four parts, I should in the same breath prepare the potential reader for contrasts or even contradictions. Olena Turnbull, for instance, finds evidence of Stevenson's belief in everyman's essential nobility or divinity that enables humanity to survive in a "cold, bleak, hostile, and godless" world; Linda Dryden, however, sees a deep-rooted fear of "the inner beast" in humans, and Michela Alliata detects a "brooding sense of evil" behind a profoundly pessimistic vision that anticipates "the poetics and ethics of the absurd". Both Dennis Denisoff and Gordon Hirsch, whose account of socio-economic background to *The Wrong Box* is one of my particular favourites, note a critique of late Victorian capitalism or commercialism;

whereas Robbie Goh diagnoses a "practical and commercialist" morality based on an acceptance of the need for all kinds of social interchange and exchange, including the literary.

And there is indeed plenty more of such food for thought. Luisa Villa, for example, foregrounds the "personal self-affirmation" that Stevenson's protagonists often achieve in opposition to a despotic but weakening father figure; Stephen Arata in turn highlights the motif of "mental abstraction" or escape from the self. Arata also suggests that Stevenson saw the reading of imaginative or contemplative literature as the proper domain of the justified idler, to whom the author should present the result of his labour in the form of a *diligentia negligens* "that seeks to efface itself" and to hide any traces of the artist's toil and trouble; others such as Glenda Norquay set "the pleasure of creation" beside the intended pleasure of the reader in their account of Stevenson's literary production. Stephen Donovan illuminates Stevenson's popularity as founded in a realisation of "the psychological depth of children's imagination"; while Richard Ambrosini records a not altogether successful attempt on Stevenson's part to mediate between simplicity and sophistication by "trying to create for himself a space between Polynesian and European cultures".

These different readings illustrate only a fraction of the possibilities for interpretation given in Stevenson's diverse and multi-faceted oeuvre whose elusive nature is referred to by quite a few of the contributors, such as Ilaria Sborgi who talks about "undecidable bodies and their disruptive effects on narrative closure". Much critical energy is spent by several essay writers in the necessarily paradoxical attempt to pinpoint indeterminacy: an effort that proves to be anything but fruitless, mainly because it is supported by a consistently high level of observation, erudition, wit, and involvement. The writers of the essays have evidently entered into close and personal engagements with the works and with the author who made them, whether as the kind of textual "demolition site" that Nathalie Jaëck perceives, or as the "epitaphic" engraving that is described by Jean-Pierre Naugrette. At this point, special mention must be made of six impressive etchings by Mirando Haz included in the present volume, as well as of the inspired illustration in watercolour and ink by Tullio Pericoli that enhances the cover.

From all that I have said so far, it should follow that this is not the kind of book which seeks to provide any closure itself, but rather one that propels the reader towards a fresh and enriched encounter with the literary works. If there is one pervading strain to all the contributions, it is the unspoken suggestion that Robert Louis Stevenson's writings are indeed worthy of close and lasting attention. As the introduction points out, none of the essays talk about the need for a reevaluation of Stevenson: but all of them can be said to take an active part in a process which

may eventually set the picture right. Who knows but this book might even help to open the doors of the Literary Hall of Fame aka *The Norton Anthology*?