

An Overview of the Estimation of Robert Louis Stevenson's Essays

Breve noticia de la recepción de los ensayos de Robert Louis Stevenson

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Recibido 4 de abril de 2022
Aceptado 25 de abril de 2022

Abstract

Robert Louis Stevenson's essayistic works are as prolific as they are formidable. Tracing down the critical milestones that brought in both the disaffection -erratic ill-informed appreciations by scholars and literary pundits- and their prompt reinstatement and subsequent revaluation in the hands of his more immediate staunch defenders, this article offers keys to an understanding of the complex and polyphonic quality of Stevenson's essays, evincing both their unexplored value and the tremendous need to rescue them from their debunking caused by the enormous popularity of his fiction.

Key words: Essay, reception, reassessment, polyphonic, complexity.

Resumen

En el presente artículo, centrado en la prolífica y excelsa obra ensayística del escritor escocés Robert Louis Stevenson, se ofrece una clave explicativa de las piedras miliare que contribuyeron tanto a jalonar la desafección de sus ensayos -erradas apreciaciones por parte de críticos y eruditos señeros, etc., como a la pronta y progresiva revitalización de los mismos, a cargo de sus más acérrimos e inmediatos defensores. El artículo da cumplida noticia de los trabajos académicos tendentes a mostrar la complejidad y el valor polifónico de los ensayos de Stevenson, evidenciando tanto su enorme valía, como la necesidad de rescatarlos del olvido al que se vieron relegados por la ingente popularidad de su obra narrativa.

Palabras clave: Ensayo, recepción, revaloración, polifónico, complejidad.

1. INTRODUCTION

My aim in this contribution is far from retelling the complete history of the evaluation of Stevenson's work. I am not aiming to register here the ups and downs of his general literary reputation as so many have done in "an attitude of kindly and agreeable patronage" (Fausset 1919: 701-2). I wish to flee from any boastful consideration to focus on his trajectory and his standing as an essayist. For, though interdependent, it developed in a slightly singular way. The fact that RLS's reputation as an essay writer specifically is so closely entwined with his overall literary reputation is, I hold, congruent with what I explore and state in this article.

Studying the reception of Stevenson's work, one is tempted to proceed thematically, or diachronically, as biographers, critics and scholars have done. I am, however, fully aware that would not do for a systematised approach and a clear exposition. I am also aware of the fact that none of the critical and theoretical approaches -such as the ethnographic impulse, the rhetorical analysis or historical and cultural revisionism, amongst others- would do either to write conclusively on, or to wholly embrace Stevenson's prolific and polyphonic essayistic work. For clarity and concision, I shall, directly, refer to the landmarks in the estimation of his essays, rather than to the low tide of his reception. The latter has been copiously accounted for while registering the ill-fated destiny and deliberate defacement Stevenson was clumsily subject to. What Ambrosini and Dury call Stevenson's "critical misfortune" which "had been already settled" through "the glorification of "a Seraph in Chocolate", at the turn of the century, and long before WWI, and "culminated" in 1914 with the "backlash" ignited by Frank Swinnerton whose arguments "would recur throughout the century" (Ambrosini and Dury 2006: xvi). Omitting to recount, once again, the misfortunes of his reception, I will omit those of the essay as a literary genre; I shall -hopefully- be consistent with Stevenson's unquenchable optimism; I shall better focus on the high accolades of his reappraisal; I shall simply note them down in a synchronic way for the reader to draw his own conclusions and to confront them with those here offered. For I wish to present the reader with an earnest invitation to ponder on whether or not the efforts here made to unbury the treasure of his other prose writings are based on satisfactory evidence and sound reasoning. Doing it that way I shall -hopefully-, encourage future scholars to fan the flames of their appreciations and to substantiate them adding their fresh views to those which follow.

Thus, I shall deal briefly with those articles and monographs fulfilling my double wish: One, to procure a much wider attention on the extraordinary value of Stevenson's essays, on their

fineness, on their elegance, on the brio and savvy of his exceptional prose writings. Two, to help revitalise the critical estimation of Stevenson's essays bringing them to their own dazzling light. To do so, I will make my way through those judged appraisals, not diachronically, but coming down from their highest praise to those of lower calibre.

2. DOWNWARD PATH

The first evidence that strikes the study of the reception of Stevenson's essays is the contrast between the suddenness of their fall and the gradual process of their revaluation. The first, Stevenson scholars have dealt extensively with -as referred in these pages-, we must now address the second.

To my mind, more fully fed with non-fictional prose and rather lean by fiction, no writer - though he never called himself other than "a journalist" - has ever understood more deeply, nor appreciated more judiciously Stevenson than the chubby "apostle of common sense" who seems to burst the seams of his initials, GKCh! This genius without "sides", but with countless sidings - I here allude to a well-known anecdote in which trying to get in a London Taxi, this enormous man in every possible sense, was instructed by its cabbie with a, "Try sideways!", to which our mountain of a man made the cutting rejoinder, "I have no sides!"-. This "Prince of Paradox", who, in his alertness never missed a chance of taking active part in a controversy, penned an unassuming and unprecedented defence of the, unlike himself, languid yet lively and equally energetic man that never filled out the beloved three in RLS! In his 1927 study, Chesterton called Stevenson "a highly honourable, responsible and chivalrous Pagan, in a world of Pagans who were most of them considerably less conspicuous for chivalry and honour". (Chesterton 1927: 76). Yet one who was conscious that beyond fantasy lies a "real spiritual mystery". Incidentally, in "Laughter and Humility", an article he contributed much earlier, Chesterton wrote:

Stevenson's enormous capacity for joy flowed directly out of his profoundly religious temperament. He conceived himself as an unimportant guest at one eternal and uproarious banquet, and instead of grumbling at the soup, he accepted it with careless gratitude that marks the baby and the real man of the world. His gaiety was neither the gaiety of the pagan, nor the gaiety of the bon vivant. It was the greater gaiety of the mystic. He could enjoy trifles because there was to him no such thing as a trifle.: He was a child who respected his dolls because they were the images of the image of God, portraits at only two remove. (Chesterton 190: 48).

Chesterton also declared that there was a orality in Louis's reaction to adventure, and maintained that, "like Odysseus, for all his adventurousness, he [Stevenson] was always

trying to get home" (Chesterton 1927: 135). Chesterton also praised Tusitala¹'s miraculous ability to conjure up "le mot juste", the exact word as "by dwelling at length on the word "interjected": in the passage which describes a man stopping a clock with interjected finger. He pointed out that though these and other findings such as having a young man described "with cordial agitated manners" (Ibid 143) may seem fortuitous they singularly added to the facile, enormous musicality of Stevenson's style.

Unlike ordinary admirers, Chesterton can rightly be called Stevenson's literary successor. In "A Defence of Penny Dreadfuls" (1901) his apology for blood-curdling fiction, the Englishman comes quite close thematically to the Scotsman in "A Penny Plain and Two Pence Coloured" (Stevenson 1924 Tusitala 29). In his *Robert Browning* (1903), *Charles Dickens* (1922) and *William Blake* (1910) Chesterton, implicitly, insists that the soundest type of critical appreciation ever was not scholarly criticism- not that by a highbrow bespectacled outsider with just "an appreciation"- but that other made by an insider with real admiration for the man. This reasoning is consistent with Stevenson's treatment of Charles of Orleans, Villon, Thoreau, Whitman, Burns, and Poe, in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (Stevenson Tusitala 27) decades earlier. Like these reviews by Stevenson, Chesterton's appreciations were made in that very spirit of the independent man of letters with a special "gusto" for the man and his work and with an extraordinary talent for communicating it.

The virtues and noble ideas in Chesterton's delightful and jocose "On Running after One's Hat" (1908) come very close to those expounded by Stevenson in "An Apology for Idlers" (1877). That excess, that childish appetite for life, that eternal capacity to exult in monotonies.

Did you ever hear a small boy complain of having to hang about a railway station and wait for a train? No; for to him to be inside a railway station is to be inside a cavern of wonder and a palace of poetical pleasures. Because to him the red light and the green light on the signal are like a new sun and a new moon. Because to him when the wooden arm falls down is as if a great king had thrown down his staff as a signal and started a shrieking tournament of trains. I myself am of little boys' habit in this matter... Many of the most purple hours of my life have been passed at Clapham Junction... in the case of all such annoyances, as I have said, everything depends upon the emotional point of view. You can safely apply the test to almost every one of the things that are currently talked of as the typical nuisance of daily life. (Chesterton 1908: 3).

¹ This was the name native Samoans gave Louis, "The Teller of tales", in their vernacular.

Unlike the boundless hem of Gilbert, we are bound to be hemmed in by surprises in our daily routines. There is joy to be had in the smallest things in nature. Life is such a constant source of thrilling sensations that we should be put on the culprit box for grumbling about its hardships. Rather than slogging and slugging our way, we should walk diligently impatient with curiosity as stated in "An Apology for Idlers".

If they [that sort of "dead-alive, hackneyed people about who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation Stevenson] have to wait an hour or so for a train, they fall into a stupid trance with their eyes open. To see them, you would suppose there was nothing to look at and no one to speak with; you would imagine they were paralysed or alienated; and yet very possibly they are hard workers in their own way, and have good eyesight for a flaw in a deed or a turn of the market. They have been to school and college, but all the time they had their eye on the medal; they have gone about in the world and mixed with clever people, but all the time they were thinking of their own affairs. As if a man's soul were not too small to begin with, they have dwarfed and narrowed theirs by a life of all work and no play; until here they are at forty, with a listless attention, a mind vacant of all material of amusement, and not one thought to rub against another, while they wait for the train. (Stevenson 1924 Tusitala 25: 56)

This connects naturally with the narrative emphasis in both essays in which fiction makes its incursion so that reasoning and arguing -"essaying"- is tantamount to telling the story². It is also connected with the old utilitarian dictum of "success", which is replaced in both thinkers by our only real obligation: to shed light on less vivacious spirits making the, happy with our presence, encouragement and reassurance.

There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy. By being happy we sow anonymous benefits upon the world, which remain unknown even to ourselves, or when they are disclosed, surprise nobody so much as the benefactor. The other day, a ragged, barefoot boy ran down the street after a marble, with so jolly an air that he set everyone he passed into a good humour; one of these persons, who had been delivered from more than usually black thoughts, stopped the little fellow and gave him some money with this remark: "You see what sometimes comes of looking pleased." If he had looked pleased before, he had now to look both pleased and mystified. (Stevensson 1924 Tusitala 25: 58).

² See for instance Chesterton's "A Piece of Chalk", "What I Found in My Pocket" and "The Perfect Game", which make us mindful of Stevenson's "An Old Scotch Gardener", "Beggars", or "Forest Notes".

When last I saw an old gentleman running after his hat in Hyde Park, I told him that a heart so benevolent as his ought to be filled with peace and thanks at the thought of how much unaffected pleasure his every gesture and bodily attitude were at that moment giving to the crowd. (Chesterton 1908:34).

In his monograph, Chesterton gives us the very essence of Stevenson's craft, philosophy and moral. Although he takes up so much space himself -he once rejoiced that he had given up his seat in the tram "to two ladies"- Chesterton is able to do it in barely a hundred pages! Those ingenious, unpretentious pages, I firmly believe with no sententious rhetorics, are worth more than the thousands by those unimaginative, arrogant "outsiders" that came before and after him. Amongst these last, Frank Swinnerton³, whose attempt to debunk Stevenson is brilliantly counter-attacked and contained by Chesterton in the said monograph.

However, this was not the first time Chesterton had felt the need for a reassessment of RLS's work that would be strong enough to distance itself from both "the Victorian whitewashers and the Post-Victorian mudslingers" (Chesterton 1927:75). He wrote several books and numerous articles on R.L.S.⁴. His 1927 ground-breaking monographic study answers each and every charge by Swinnerton superbly. Chesterton also brings up the great Scot in his discussion of *The Victorian Age in Literature* warning that "when we look back up the false perspective of time, Stevenson does seem in a sense to have prepared that imperial and downward path", even though "he would not have liked it if he had lived to understand it" (Chesterton 1913: 68). The Scotsman would have much appreciated the Englishman's judgement, for they had quite a lot in common beyond their mutual fondness for toy theatres. The first chapter of his study mentioned above is, precisely, called "The Myth of Stevenson". More than two decades before the publication of his monograph, as early as in 1902, he had published "The Characteristics of Robert Louis Stevenson"⁵. Still a year earlier, he had objected that Moore probably resented Louis's being "possessed and indeed the incarnation of that tangible spiritual lightness, that sixth sense of literature, which is sometimes called humour and sometimes humility". (Chesterton 1913:110). In his review

³ Frank Swinnerton, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Critical Study*. (1914). Also, to notice the pretentious subtitle, which as Richard Dury says, "is deliberately chosen to show an intellectually rigorous approach and to distinguish it from earlier readings of Stevenson's life and 'personality'". (The Robert Louis Stevenson Website at www.robert-louis-stevenson.org.) (This visit, March 2020).

⁴ See for instance, 'Stevenson', a review of Baidon's 1901, in *Twelve Types*. 1901. London: Arthur L. Humphreys and 'The Characteristics of Robert Louis Stevenson', in Chesterton & Nicholl (1902).

⁵ Chesterton, G.K. & William Robertson Nicholl] (1902a). "Robert Louis Stevenson". London: Hodder & Stoughton (The Bookman Booklets, No. 2). Also published in New York: James Pott, 1906. Chesterton, G.K (1902b).

of Yeats's *The Secret Rose*, George Moore had attacked Stevenson making "some strange statements "as, "Stevenson imagined no human soul, and he invented no story that anyone will remember..." (Furnas 1952:380), or that other pure nonsensical declaration that "great literature cannot be composed from narratives of perilous adventures"⁶. Nor will it be the last time that I will call on GKCh to touch on their brotherhood while discussing Stevenson. The following quote will do for the time being.

Glad did I live and gladly die⁷, has a lilt that no repetition can make quite unreal, light as the lifted spires of Spyglass Hill and translucent as the dancing waves; types of tenuous but tenacious levity and the legend that has made his graveyard a mountain-peak and his epitaph a song⁸. (Chesterton 1927:182).

From the mountain-peak and clearing of such illuminating criticism, I start my descent into the still phenomenal recognition by Stevenson's foremost and authoritative biographer. We shall, however, omit to descend into the maelstrom -to any of the depths already dealt with in the previous pages-. As stated profusely, J.C. Furnas's *Voyage to Windward, The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* (1952) is of paramount importance for being the first critical biography⁹ which educated unparalleled attention to the essays, as a browse through the entries of works listed will immediately reveal-. A truth also proven by the critical apparatus consisting of detailed notes, and works consulted¹⁰. Like Chesterton, Furnas helps us to steer clear of unwelcome overlapping and mishaps. Notwithstanding, it is a matter of both intellectual rigour and academic honesty to praise Furnas for "scourging" those uninvolved insincere critics like Moore, Benson and Swinnerton and their "waspyish" adverse views. George Moore accused Stevenson of mere trickery: composing by a technique of substituting banal expressions with more striking replacements: "literary marquetry" (Furnas 1952:380)¹¹. On his part, Benson claimed that Stevenson's forced style "compelled him, as under the lash to sacrifice simplicity to the desire to be striking and sonorous, and to arrest attention to himself by outlandish habiliments" (Ibid: 381).

⁶ George Moore, *London, Daily Chronical*, 24th April, 1897.

⁷ Stevenson's "Requiem", as engraved in his tomb at Mount Vaea, Samoa

⁸ Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, 1927, p. 224.

⁹ The first biography was the canonical 1901 by G. Balfour, Stevenson's cousin perjured and misrepresented by the family vision and subjective portrayal. Andrew Noble (1983:7) accurately celebrates the extraordinary merits of Furnas' *Voyage to Windward* as a "truly great biography" "a true labour of love and masterpiece. It and Stevenson's letters, rightly praised by Henry James, do truly illuminate the art".

¹⁰ See J. C. Furnas 1952: pp. 475-478; pp. 421-460, and pp. 405-416 respectively.

¹¹ Also mentioned in Lesley Graham's "The Reception of Stevenson's Essays", JSS October 2012, p. 321.

3. TOWARD EVALUATION

The chaff of his reputation winnowed, we continue downhill to gauge the tangy grain in the reception of Stevenson's essays. Their excellence, as a whole, would not have been possibly asserted had it not been for Professor Roger G. Swearingen's superb research, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide* (1980). Swearingen compiled a complete chronological bibliography of the prose writings, suppling -for each entry- precise indications on the location of all manuscripts, the place and date of their first publication, notes on the sources, the process of composition and much else. His guide constitutes an indispensable reference for every Stevenson scholar. Besides this essential publication offering the intricate publishing history of each individual essay and of his other prose writings, Swearingen has contributed valuable editions of Stevenson's texts hitherto unpublished pieces such as *An Old Song and Edifying Letters of the Rutherford Family*. (1982). Amongst his most recent publications see Stevenson's *The Hair Trunk or The Ideal Commonwealth. An Extravaganza* (2014). In our correspondence, he announced the forthcoming publication of his biographical and critical work on Stevenson. Every RLS enthusiast must be thankful to this scholar for his munificence.

Kiely's *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (1964) though a sound reading of just the fiction offers extremely useful passages in which he asserts that hat Stevenson was constantly on the move, consistently attempting to establish "a philosophy, a morality, and a way of writing undergoing change" (Kiely 1964:33). Both his non-fiction and fiction bear witness to an abiding interest in a theoretical engagement with adventure" (Ibid. 38; emphasis mine). He makes, notwithstanding, reference to essays and travel books like *An Inland Voyage*, where Kiely states that the vocabulary of adventure is reserved for the severe mental state of blankness while paddling. Or to *Travels with A Donkey*¹² where, Kiely asserts, adventure for Stevenson is "a kind of sacred purity which ought not to be tainted with moral or psychological convention". (Ibid: 44). In tracing what he understands are the two main epochs in Stevenson's writing, he refers to the late 1880s as the period in which his finest essays, like "Pulvis et Umbra" were published; one characterised by "metaphor inversion, hyperbole, balanced phrases and interior rhyme"; one in which "Stevenson appears to squint at the XIX cent like a suspicious child" (Ibid: 135).

¹² *An Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey* are Stevenson's most popular travel books. The first records his canoe trip in Belgium and France with his crony Sir Walter Simpson (September 1876; first published in 1878); the second the 12-day, 120 mile walk he undertook (September-October 1878) across the Cévennes Mountains in Southern France, with a mouse-coloured she donkey he named Modestine, as his sole companion. Although still too close -both temporally and spatially- to Scotland, they are overfilled with anecdotes and "culture shock", distinctively felt and wittily reflected.

It is a real paradox, one urging the honest critic to rise to the bait, that the mud-slinging devil's advocate should be the one remembered while the honest defence counsel -having argued and reasoned- is enshrouded in silence by the forum. That was, exactly, what happened to Janet Adam Smith. As Furnas tells us, Janet deplored "the fashion in which Stevenson as person -whether truly conceived or not- has obscured the literary artist of high integrity" (Furnas 1952:376). In her *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record of Friendship and Criticism* (1948), compiling the letters addressed to each other, Miss Adam Smith speaks highly of that, veritably, unique debate based on mutual understanding and appreciation. She dwells on that singular literary friendship founded not so much on charm and "pouncing sympathies" as "on shared respect for and grasp of the art to which both were dedicated". (Ibid: 377). The relevance of that engaging volume was overshadowed by those bumptious "neo-Jamesians" who would not approve of the serious European-American classic being regarded as identical with the Scottish author writing nursery rhymes and adventure stories for boys. In so doing, they failed to take heed of James's recognition of Stevenson as "the sole and single Anglo-Saxon capable of perceiving" how well the latest James novel was written (Janet Adam Smith 1948:188).

In her preface to Coburn's edition of R.L.S.: *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes* (1954), Smith draws attention on the "polished essays and articles" consolidated in 1878 in book form, in which facts and appearance give way to the picturesque, the story and the atmosphere. She states that Stevenson "builds up his pictures by accumulation of carefully selected detail". By "precise, selective vision". A very acute observation that would have opened early perspectives in the appreciation of the essays had it been widely disseminated.

Parallel to that disregard for the assumedly "irrelevant" were early critical appreciations such as those by sympathetic defenders like Richard Le Galliene, James Barret, Scott-James and Janetta Newton-Robinson. Galliene declared "Mr Stevenson's final fame will be that of an essayist, nearest and dearest fame of the prose-writer" and called him "one of the most original philosophers of his time"¹³. It can be gleaned from several sources that it was his sad associations with Oscar Wilde that buried Le Galliene as a poet and essayist, together with his subtle appreciations. The same can be surmised about James Barret's intriguing critiques. Barret was of the opinion that in "Beggars", Stevenson "touches the real depths of

¹³ Richard Le Galliene in a 1900 serious and considered view of Stevenson's essays "The Dethroning of Stevenson" a chapter of his *Sleeping Beauty and Other Prose Fancies*, (London, /New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head). See also the letter he exchanged with RLS on 28 Dec 1893, Letters 4: 247-8.

the question, and illumines the subject with many a brilliant flash of truth and insight"¹⁴. On his part, Scott James enthused, "How many memorable phrases there are in these essays, how much just exploding of prejudices, recalling of simpler and elemental ideals, of probing down to important and fundamental truths"¹⁵. Janetta Newton-Robinson claimed, in 1893 "that Stevenson's essays "are the most fascinating that have appeared in England since the time of Lamb", and that it is "as an essayist that his intimated know and love him (Graham 2012:324). And though Maixner (1981) made a great effort so that this early positive revaluation would not be wiped out by the new tide, the closing to his intro to the Critical Heritage in 1981 makes clear it did not click.

Another paradox -this did click but in the unwanted direction- takes us to negotiate the wide downwards staircase of Stevenson's critical reception from those tall landings to a dizzy low landing, that of David Daiches's *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Revaluation* (1947) which opens with the sentence: "The works of Robert Louis Stevenson are not widely read today"; and goes on to aver "it has long been the fashion to esteem him as an essayist and dismiss the novels", so that part of the aim of the study is 'to redirect attention to the novels as the most impressive expression of Stevenson's genius' (Daiches 1947:148). In my conversations with the acclaimed emeritus professor, while being the dean of the SUISS (Scottish Universities International Summer School) in the late 1990s, Daiches seemed to cherish the essays in a way contradictory to his appreciations of *An Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey* as examples of 'a show piece, a sort of prize essay' (Ibid: 154); and to his similar consideration of *The Amateur Emigrant* and *The Silverado Squatters*¹⁶ as 'more important as sources for Stevenson's biography than as literary works in their own right' (Ibid: 167).

For Daiches sees them as "self-conscious" (Ibid: 148), and "affected" (Ibid: 150). Overlooking the essays on literary theory, he gives a quotation from "The Lantern Bearers" followed by the comment "The modern reader looks askance at this pretentious and perhaps at the same time commonplace philosophising" (Ibid:167). Daiches' aim was to stress Stevenson's importance as a novelist and a as a Scottish novelist, not as a consummate essayist. Which meant a critical regression to a more auspicious treatment like that of *The Cambridge History*

¹⁴ James Barret, "The Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson", *New Century Review* 7 (1900).

¹⁵ R.A. Scott-James in a review of the Pentland Edition in 1906 (*The Daily News*, Oct. 26, 1906)

¹⁶ Stevenson sailed from Greenock to New York aboard the *Devonia*, an immigrant ship, as a steerage passenger, 7th-17th August 1879. Then, by train, from New Jersey to Monterey, California, 18th-30th August 1879. It was a truly miserable crossing that left him at death's door. The first leg of the journey is retold in *The Amateur Emigrant* -Edin Ed 3. Tus 18- but it was withdrawn, in 1880, by his cronies in London deeming it would damage Louis' reputation- while his experiences on the second appeared in *Across the Plains* (1883.) *The Silverado Squatters* retells his stay with his wife Fanny Osbourne as a newly wedded couple in a derelict Silverado mine infested with rattlesnakes, north of Calistoga, on the slopes of Mt. St. Helena, California. (May 1880; first published in 1883).

of *English and American Literature* (1907-21), which in *The Victorian Age*, Part Two, Vol XIV described our author, in the main entry for Stevenson, as “the foremost essayist since Lamb”. As Lesley Graham rightly asserts, “In his desire to rehabilitate Stevenson’s fictional work Daiches correspondingly downplayed the merits of the essays” (Graham 2012:325). Still Daiches’s work was amply included among the period most critics call “the reinstatement”. Hence the paradox. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to mention Daiches here if only to recognise his authoritative efforts in bringing Stevenson to the fore at a complex moment in the story of his assessment.

McLynn (1993:106-110, 134-137) shares David Daiches's view that, though delightful, frequently quoted, reprinted and anthologised both *An Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey* were justifiably silenced because “they are superficial and immature works”. Bell (1992:120) calls them “dull landscape sketches and dull character studies, as uninspiring as much of the weather the intrepid pair encountered” (see n.23 p. In Hayward 2012:266). Even Furnas (1981:378) refers to the first a bit offhand as a “dulcet experiment” opposing it to “the sturdier skill of *Silverado*”. My views on both classics by the genius of a young Stevenson are closer to that of Clunas', Arata's and Harman's interpretation of the introspective value of these early travelogues. Clunas thus, asserts, “it is the going that matters because the journey reproduces the flux of living” (Clunas 1996:54-73). Arguing that Stevenson does not want to place himself in the centre of the new experience, but “in this flux”. It is through movement that he gains that detachment from the “inner constraints and obligations” of his own culture. While Arata¹⁷ responding to the offence by the Modernists, contends that, like William Morris, RLS “charges idleness and escapism with revolutionary energy” (Ambrosini and Dury 206:3-12). On her part, Harman (2005:143) holds that although Louis belittled his first two travel books, “he brought sophistication to a form that had few notable practitioners (except Heine and Sterne, both of whom he venerated). *An Inland* turned out to be about a frame of mind, and *Travels with a Donkey* a cautionary tale of how much effort and artifice were involved if the middle-class Victorian wished to get “back to nature””.

Within that same purpose, there were other critical works, however not that influential, still dealing with ample aspects of our author’s life and work. Such was the case of John F. Genung's *Stevenson's Attitude to Life* (1901) Alexander Japp's *Robert Louis Stevenson, A Record, An Estimate, A Memorial* (1905) and George Hellman's *The True Stevenson: A Study*

¹⁷ Stephen Arata is associate professor of English at the University of Virginia. *He has done extensive research on Victorian literature and is the editor of William Morris's News From Nowhere for the Broadview Literary Texts.*

in *Clarification* (1925). Though they cannot be considered early monographs -they grew out of a sort of symposia of RLS's attitudes towards God, sex, religion, and beyond death- they are weighty for culling from the essays, letters, reminiscences and other. Which points to an increased attention on the essays while examining RLS's attitude toward religion.

All considerations are ancillary to the loftiest, overriding issue here, that of how can any reappraisal be obtained when more than a few of the essays remain still unpublished¹⁸. How precipitous is that ridge between those critical articles and monographs and the work by that legion of biographers and adulators? How abrupt that between the early censorial disparagements by modernists and the subsequent spirited defence? How incumbent that we should reinstate the essay as, truly, a “felicity with words”, a crucial genre for its consummate tact, for its revealed knowledge, for its penchant for educating the mind and the soul? Philip Lopate and Lydia Fakundiny¹⁹ feel that urge, and they both include Stevenson in their invaluable anthologies of the very best essays. Those who -unlike Baidon (1901)- had no praise for Stevenson essays, lauded neither their unmistakable style, nor “the sense of personal frankness and intimacy” that his non-fiction evoked in the reader. Were did their rigour lie?

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¹⁸ For a comprehensive catalogue of Stevenson's unpublished essays (unfinished, untracked retrievable, etc) see The RLS Website (www.robert-louis-stevenson.org).

¹⁹ Philip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay. An Anthology from the Classic Era to the Present*. Publisher : Anchor; First Edition (January 15, 1995). Lydia Fakundiny, *The Art of the Essay*. Houghton Mifflin College Div (December 1, 1990).

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