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[(essay date October 1887) *In the following essay, originally published in 1887, Gosse notes that Stevenson's poetry has many of the same characteristics as his prose writing, but doubts that in the future readers will value the poetry over the prose.*]

Though Mr. Stevenson's prose volumes are more than twelve in number, and though he had been thought of essentially as a prose writer, the ivory shoulder of the lyre has peeped out now and then. I do not refer to his early collections of verse, to *Not I, and Other Poems*, to *Moral Emblems*, and to *The Graver and the Pen*. (I mention these scarce publications of the Davos press in the hope of rousing wicked passions in the breasts of other collectors, since my own set of them is complete.) These volumes were decidedly occult. A man might build upon them a reputation as a sage, but hardly as a poet. Their stern morality came well from one whose mother's milk has been the 'Shorter Catechism'; they are books which no one can read and not be the better for; but as mere verse, they leave something to be desired. *Non ragionam di lor, ma guarda*, if you happen to be lucky enough to possess them, *e passa*.¹ Where the careful reader has perceived that Mr. Stevenson was likely to become openly a poet has been in snatches of verse published here and there in periodicals, and of a quality too good to be neglected. Nevertheless, the publication of *A Child's Garden of Verses* was something of a surprise, and perhaps the new book of grown-up poems, *Underwoods* is more surprising still. There is no doubt about it any longer. Mr. Stevenson is a candidate for the bays.

The *Child's Garden of Verses* has now been published long enough to enable us to make a calm consideration of its merits. When it was fresh, opinion was divided, as it always is about a new strong thing, between those who, in Mr. Longfellow's phrase about the little girl, think it very, very good, and those who think it is horrid. After reading the new book, the *Underwoods*, we come back to *A Child's Garden* with a clearer sense of the writer's intention, and a wider experience of his poetical outlook upon life. The later book helps us to comprehend the former; there is the same sincerity, the same buoyant simplicity, the same curiously candid and confidential attitude of mind. If any one doubted that Mr. Stevenson was putting his own childish memories into verse in the first book, all doubt must cease in reading the second book, where the experiences, although those of an adult, have exactly the same convincing air of candour. The first thing which struck the reader of *A Child's Garden* was the extraordinary clearness and precision with which the immature fancies of eager childhood were reproduced in it. People whose own childish memories had become very vague, and whose recollections of their games and dreams were hazy in the extreme, asked themselves how far this poet's visions were inspired by real memory and how far by invention. The new book sets that question at rest. ...

We now perceive that it is not invention, but memory of an extraordinarily vivid kind, patiently directed to little things, and charged with imagination; and we turn back with increased interest to *A Child's Garden*, assured that it gives us a unique thing, a transcript of that child-mind which we have all possessed and enjoyed, but of which no one, except Mr. Stevenson, seems to have carried away a photograph. Long ago, in one of the very earliest, if I remember right, of those essays by R. L. S. for which we used so eagerly to watch the 'Cornhill Magazine' in Mr. Leslie Stephen's time, in the paper called Child[s] Play, this retention of what is wiped off from the memories of the rest of us was clearly displayed. Out of this rarely suggestive essay I will quote a few lines, which might have been printed as an introduction to *A Child's Garden*:

'In the child's world of dim sensation, play is all in all. "Making believe" is the gist of his whole life, and he cannot so much as take a walk except in character. I could not learn my alphabet without some suitable *mise-en-scène*, and had to act a business-man in an office before I could sit down to my book. ... I remember, as though it were yesterday, the expansion of spirit, the dignity and self-reliance, that came with a pair of mustachios in burnt cork, even when there was none to see. Children are even content to forego what we call the realities, and prefer the shadow to the substance. When they might be speaking intelligently together, they chatter gibberish by the hour, and are quite happy because they are making believe to speak French.

Probably all will admit the truth of this statement of infant fancy, when it is presented to them in this way. But how many of us, in perfect sincerity, not relying upon legends of the nursery, not refreshed by the study of our own children's 'make-believe,' can say that we clearly

recollect the method of it? We shall find that our memories are like a breath upon the glass, like the shape of a broken wave. Nothing is so hopelessly lost, so utterly volatile, as the fancies of our childhood. But Mr. Stevenson, alone amongst us all, appears to have kept daguerreotypes of the whole series of his childish sensations. Except the late Mrs. Ewing,² he seems to be without a rival in this branch of memory as applied to literature.

The various attitudes of literary persons to the child are very interesting. There are, for instance, poets like Victor Hugo and Mr. Swinburne who come to admire, who stay to adore, and who do not disdain to throw their purple over any humble article of nursery use. They are so magnificent in their address to infancy, they say so many brilliant and unexpected things, that the mother is almost as much dazzled as she is gratified. We stand round, with our hats off, and admire the poet as much as he admires the child; but we experience no regret when he presently turns away to a discussion of grown-up things. We have an ill-defined notion that he reconnoitres infancy from the outside, and has not taken the pains to reach the secret mind of childhood. It is to be noted, and this is a suspicious circumstance, that Mr. Swinburne and Victor Hugo like the child better the younger it is. ...

To the real student of child-life the baby contains possibilities, but is at present an uninteresting chrysalis. It cannot carry a gun through the forest, behind the sofa-back; it is hardly so useful as a cushion to represent a passenger in a railway-train of inverted chairs.

Still more remote than the dithyrambic poets are those writers about children--and they are legion--who have ever the eye fixed upon morality, and carry the didactic tongue thrust in the cheek of fable. The late Charles Kingsley, who might have made so perfect a book of his 'Water-Babies,' sins notoriously in this respect. The moment a wise child perceives the presence of allegory, or moral instruction, all the charm of a book is gone. Parable is the very antipodes of childish 'make-believe,' into which the element of ulterior motive or secondary moral meaning never enters for an instant. The secret of the charm of Mrs. Gatty's 'Parables from Nature,'³ which were the fairest food given to the very young minds in my day, was that the fortunate child never discovered that they were parables at all. I, for one, used to read and re-read them as realistic statements of fact, the necessity of pointing a moral merely having driven the amiable author to the making of her story a little more fantastic, and therefore more welcome, than it would otherwise be. It was explained to me one hapless day that the parables were of a nature to instill nice principles into the mind; and from that moment Mrs. Gatty became a broken idol. Lewis Carroll owed his great and deserved success to his suppleness in bending his fancy to the conditions of a mind that is dreaming. It has never seemed to me that the 'Adventures in Wonderland' were specially childish; dreams are much the same, whether a child or a man is passive under them, and it is a fact that Lewis Carroll appeals just as keenly to adults as to children. In Edward Lear's rhymes and ballads the love of grotesque nonsense in the grown-up child is mainly appealed to; and these are certainly appreciated more by parents than by children.

It would be easy, by multiplying examples, to drive home my contention that only two out of the very numerous authors who have written successfully on or for children have shown a clear recollection of the mind of healthy childhood itself. Many authors have achieved brilliant success in describing children, in verbally caressing them, in amusing, in instructing them; but only two, Mrs. Ewing in prose, and Mr. Stevenson in verse, have sat down with them without disturbing their fancies, and have looked into the world of 'make-believe' with the children's own eyes. If Victor Hugo should visit the nursery, every head of hair ought to be brushed, every pinafore be clean, and nurse must certainly be present, as well as mamma. But Mrs. Ewing or Mr. Stevenson might lead a long romp in the attic when nurse was out shopping, and not a child in the house should know that a grown-up person had been there. ...

In publishing this autumn a second volume, this time of grown-up verses, Mr. Stevenson has ventured on a bolder experiment. His *Underwoods*, with its title openly borrowed from Ben Johnson, is an easy book to appreciate and enjoy, but not to review. In many respects it is plainly the work of the same fancy that described the Country of Counterpane and the Land of Story-books, but it has grown a little sadder, and a great deal older. There is the same delicate sincerity, the same candour and simplicity, the same artless dependence on the good faith of the public. The ordinary themes of the poets are untouched; there is not one piece from cover to cover which deals with the passion of love. The book is occupied with friendship, with nature, with the honourable instincts of man's moral machinery. Above all, it enters with great minuteness, and in a very confidential spirit, into the theories and moods of the writer himself. It will be to many readers a revelation of the everyday life of an author whose impersonal writings have given them so much and so varied pleasure. Not a dozen ordinary interviewers could have extracted so much of the character of the man himself as he gives us in these one hundred and twenty pages.

The question of admitting the personal element into literature is one which is not very clearly understood. People try to make rules about it, and say that an author may describe his study, but not his dining-room, and his wife, but not her cousin. The fact is that no rules can possibly be laid down in a matter which is one of individual sympathy. The discussion whether a writer may speak of himself or no is utterly vain until we are informed in what voice he has the habit of speaking. It is all a question which depends on the *timbre* of the literary voice. As in life there are persons whose sweetness of utterance is such that we love to have them warbling at our side, no matter on what subject they speak, and others to whom we have scarcely patience to listen if they want to tell us that we have inherited a fortune, so it is in literature. Except that little class of stoic critics who like to take their books *in vacuo*, most of us prefer to know something about the authors we read. But whether we like them to tell it us themselves, or no, depends entirely on the voice. Thackeray and Fielding are never confidential enough to satisfy us; Dickens and Smollett set our teeth on edge directly they start upon a career of confidential expansion; and this has nothing to do with any preference for 'Tom Jones' over 'Peregrine Pickle.' There is no doubt that Mr. Stevenson is one of those writers the sound of whose personal voices is pleasing to the public, and there must be hundreds of his admirers who will not miss one word of '**To a Gardener**' or '**The Mirror Speaks**', and who will puzzle out each of the intimate addresses to his private friends with complete satisfaction.

The present writer is one of those who are most under the spell. For me Mr. Stevenson may speak for ever, and chronicle at full length all his uncles and his cousins and his nurses. But I think if it were my privilege to serve him in the capacity of Molière's old woman, or to be what a friend of mine would call his 'foolometer,' I should pluck up courage to represent to him that this thing can be overdone. I openly avow myself an enthusiast, yet even I shrink before the confidential character of the prose inscription to *Underwoods*. This volume is dedicated, if you please, to eleven physicians, and it is strange that one so all compact of humour as Mr. Stevenson should not have noticed how funny it is to think of an author seated affably in an armchair, simultaneously summoning by name eleven physicians to take a few words of praise each, and a copy of his little book.

The objective side of Mr. Stevenson's mind is very rich and full, and he has no need to retire too obstinately upon the subjective. Yet I know not than anything he has written in verse is more worthily dignified than the following little personal fragment, in which he refers, of course, to the grandfather who died a few weeks before his birth, and to the father whom he had just conducted to the grave, both heroic builders of lighthouses:

Say not of me that weakly I declined
The labours of my sires, and fled the sea,
The towers we founded and the lamps we lit,
To play at home with paper like a child.
But rather say: In the afternoon of time
A strenuous family dusted from its hands
The sand of granite, and beholding far
Along the sounding coast its pyramids
And tall memorials catch the dying sun,
Smiled well content, and to this childish task
Around the fire addressed its evening hours.
[xxxviii]

This is a particularly happy specimen of Mr. Stevenson's blank verse, in which metre, as a rule, he does not show to advantage. It is not that his verses are ever lame or faulty, for in the technical portion of the art he seldom fails, but that his rhymeless iambics remind the ear too much now of Tennyson, now of Keats. He is, on the contrary, exceedingly happy and very much himself in that metre of eight or seven syllables, with couplet-rhymes, which served so well the first poets who broke away from heroic verse, such as Swift and Lady Winchilsea, Green and Dyer. If he must be affiliated to any school of poets it is to these, who hold the first outworks between the old classical camp and the invading army of romance, to whom I should ally him. Martial is with those octosyllabists of Queen Anne, and to Martial might well have been assigned, had they been in old Latin, the delicately homely lines, '**To a Gardener**'. How felicitous is this quatrain about the onion--

Let first the onion flourish there,
Rose among roots, the maiden fair,
Wine-scented and poetic soul
Of the capacious salad-bowl.

Or this, in more irregular measure, and enfolding a loftier fancy--

Sing clearer, Muse, or evermore be still,
Sing truer, or no longer sing!
No more the voice of melancholy Jacques
To make a weeping echo in the hill;
But as the boy, the pirate of the spring,
From the green elm a living linnet takes,
One natural verse recapture--then be still.
[xxxi]

It would be arrogant in the extreme to decide whether or no Mr. R. L. Stevenson's poems will be read in the future. They are, however, so full of character, so redolent of his own fascinating temperament, that it is not too bold to suppose that so long as his prose is appreciated those who love that will turn to this. There have been prose writers whose verse has not lacked accomplishment or merit, but has been so far from interpreting their prose that it rather disturbed its effect and weakened its influence. Cowley is an example of this, whose ingenious and dryly intellectual poetry positively terrified the reader away from his eminently suave and human essays. Neither of Mr. Stevenson's volumes of poetry will thus disturb his prose. Opinions may be divided as to their positive value, but no one will doubt that the same characteristics are displayed in the poems, the same suspicion of 'the abhorred pedantic sanhedrim,' the same fulness of life and tenderness of hope, the same bright felicity of epithet as in the essays and romances. The belief, however, may be expressed without fear of contradiction that Mr. Stevenson's fame will rest mainly upon his verse and not upon his prose, only in that dim future when Mr. Matthew Arnold's prophecy shall be fulfilled and Shelley's letters shall be preferred to his lyrical poems. It is saying a great deal to acknowledge that the author of 'Kidnapped' is

scarcely less readable in verse than he is in prose.

Notes

1. Dante, 'Inferno', iii, 51: Speak not of them, but look and pass.

2. Juliana Horatia Ewing (1841-85), daughter of Mrs Gatty (see n. 3 below), was author of 'The Brownies and Other Tales' (1870), 'Jackanapes' (1883), 'Daddy Darwin's Dovecote' (1884), etc. Most of her work first appeared in 'Aunt Judy's Magazine', edited by Mrs Gatty from 1866 to 1885.

3. Mrs Margaret Gatty (1809-73); her 'Parables of Nature' appeared in five volumes from 1855 to 1871.

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Robert Louis Stevenson (13 November 1850 – 3 December 1894) was a Scottish novelist and travel writer, most noted for *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *A Child's Garden of Verses*. Born and educated in Edinburgh, Stevenson suffered from serious bronchial trouble for much of his life, but continued to write prolifically and travel widely in defiance of his poor health. As a young man, he mixed in London literary circles, receiving encouragement from Andrew Lang and Robert Louis Stevenson is best known as the author of the children's classic *Treasure Island*, and the adult horror story, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Both of these novels have curious origins. A map of an imaginary island gave Stevenson the idea for the first story, and a nightmare supplied the premise of the second. Throwing the first manuscript into the fire, he rewrote the tale as an allegory in another three days, and then polished it over six weeks. Although he would later claim that it was the worst thing he ever wrote, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* sold forty thousand copies in Britain during the first six months, and brought Stevenson more attention than he had previously ever known.